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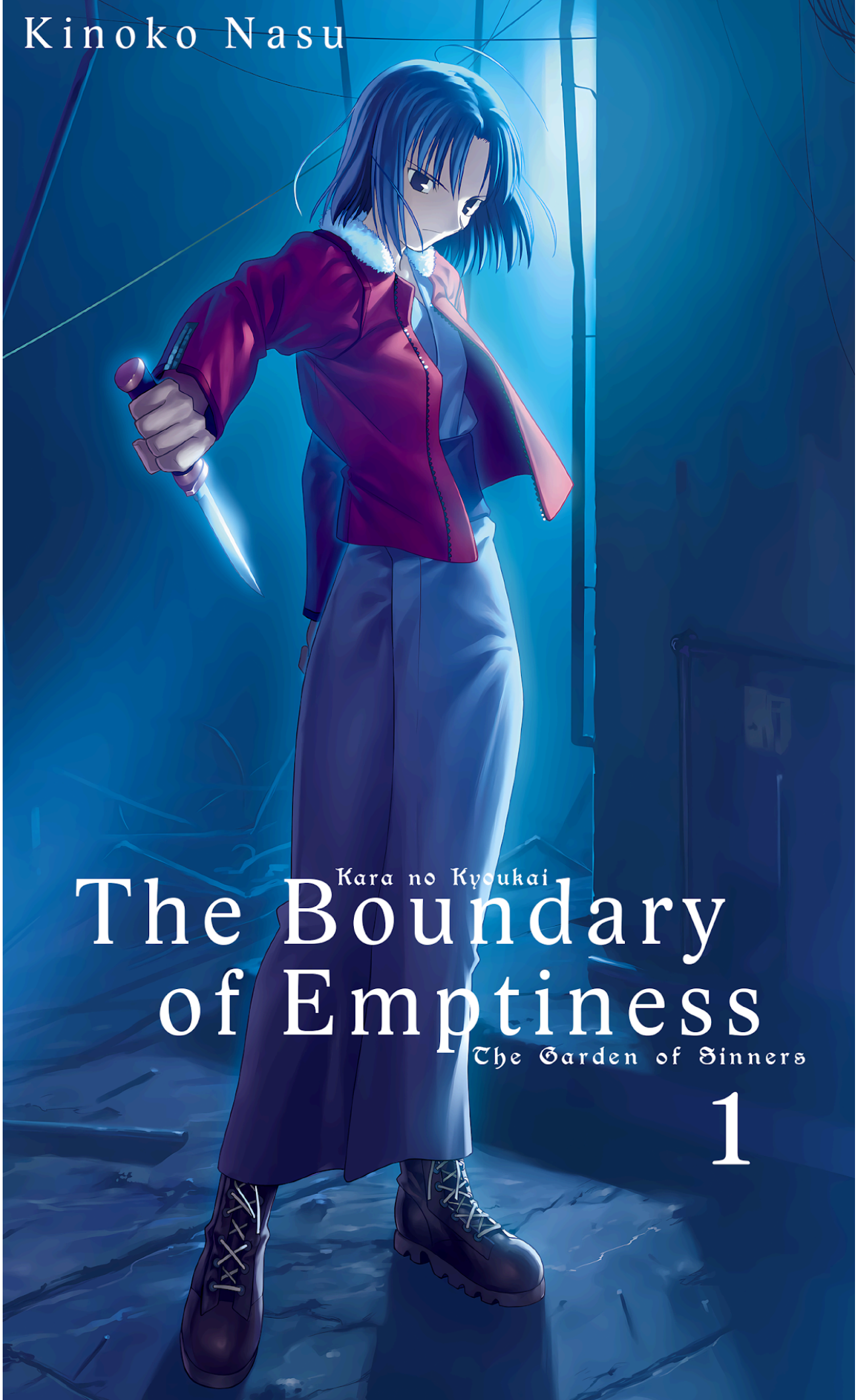

Kara no Kyoukai

The Boundary of Emptiness

The Garden of Sinners

1

The Boundary of Emptiness
Kara no Kyoukai
空の境界
the Garden of sinners
1

1 / **Overlooking View** Kirie Fujou
2 / **Murder Speculation (Part 1)** Ryougi Shiki
3 / **Remaining Sense of Pain** Asagami Fujino
4 / **The Hollow Shrine** " "
Intermission / **Intermission**
5 / **Paradox Spiral .Upper** Enjou Tomoe

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Table of Contents

1／Overlooking View (Thanatos)

2／Murder Speculation - Part 1 (...and nothing heart)

3／Remaining Sense of Pain (ever cry, never life)

4／The Hollow Shrine (garan-no-dou.)

Intermission

5／Paradox Spiral (Paradox Paradigm) .Upper

1/ Overlooking View

Thanatos.

That day, I chose to take the main street home.

It was just a whim, and a very rare thing for me to do.

Walking woodenly along the building-lined street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down.

It was a squishing sound that isn't usually heard.

The person lying on the pavement, broken, had obviously died from falling off a building.

A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete.

The only features that remained were the dark black hair and the pale, thin, fragile-looking limbs.

And that featureless, crushed face.

The whole scene reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the covers of a heavy tome.

Probably because the corpse, with only its neck bent like a fetus, looked like a broken lily to me.

/Overlooking View

/1

On a night at the beginning of August, Mikiya came by without any notice.

"Good evening. You look lazy as always, Shiki."

The sudden visitor stands by the entrance as he gives a boring greeting with a smile.

"I passed an accident on my way here. A girl jumped from the top of a building: a suicide. Though I heard it's been happening a lot recently I never thought I'd see one myself. Here, freezer."

He throws me a plastic bag from a convenience store as he unties his shoes by the door. Inside are two strawberry Häagen-Dazs. I guess he means I should put them in the freezer before they melt.

While I was slowly checking out the contents of the bag, Mikiya had finished taking off his shoes and was stepping across the threshold.

My house is a one room apartment. If you go past the hallway, which isn't even a meter long, from the entrance you get to the room serving as both bedroom and living room.

Staring at the back of Mikiya, who was stepping quickly into the room, I followed him into my room.

"Shiki. You skipped school again today, right? You can do something later about your grades, but you won't be able to pass unless you attend at least the required number of days. Did you forget about our promise to go to college together?"

"Do you have the right to lecture me about school? I don't remember such a promise, and what's more, you've already dropped out of college."

"Uh, if you say 'rights', there aren't any rights for anybody."

Sounding sophisticated, Mikiya sits down. He tends to let out his true feelings when he's on the defensive; it's something I remembered just recently.

Mikiya sat in the middle of the room.

I sit on the bed behind him and lay down horizontally. He keeps his back turned towards me.

I look at that back, which is a bit small compared to the average guy, absent-mindely.

This young man named Kokutou Mikiya seems to be my friend from back in high school.

In the midst of youngsters nowadays — where so many fads appear one after another, gain speed, and finally dash out of control into disappearance — he was a "rare kind" that boringly kept the image of a student.

He doesn't dye his hair or let it grow long. He doesn't get a tan or wear accessories. He doesn't carry a cell phone or play around with women. His height is around 170cm or so. His kind-looking face is more on the cute side and his black-rimmed glasses make that feature stand out even more.

Even though he has graduated from high school, he dresses ordinarily. If he were to dress up a bit, he would likely catch a few eyes.

"Shiki, are you listening? I met your mother too. Shouldn't you show up at the Ryougi House at least once? I heard that you haven't even contacted them since you got out of the hospital two months ago."

"No. Especially when there's no need."

"Hey, even if there's no need you should be happy just to be together, they're your family after all."

I paused a bit before replying. "I don't know. It can't be helped ‘cause I can't really think of it as real. We'll just feel more distant even if we see each other. I still feel weird talking to you, so there’s no way I'll be able to keep up a conversation with those strangers."

"Geez, things will never settle if you keep it this way. It'll be like this your whole life if you don't open up your heart to them. It's not right for parents and children to live so close together and yet not even meet each other."

I frown at those reproachful words.

Not right, he says. What exactly is "not right"? There's nothing illegal in what's happening between me and my parents. It's just that the child was involved in a traffic accident and lost all its memories. We are proven to be family by law and by blood, so I'd assume there's nothing wrong with the current situation.

Mikiya always worries about how other people feel. Although I think that is just pointless.

◇

Ryougi Shiki has been my friend since high school. Our school was a famous private high school which taught a lot of students who went to a good college. When I went to see if I was admitted, the name Ryougi Shiki stood out so much that it was stuck in my head.

Ironically, we ended up being in the same class. Since then, I became one of the few friends Shiki had.

Our school did not have uniforms so everyone expressed themselves by how they dressed. Within these people, Shiki stood out. This is because Shiki always wears a kimono. Always.

The simple flowing form of the kimono fit Shiki's sloping shoulders so much it made the classroom feel like a samurai-style house just by having Shiki walk through it. It was not just the looks of Shiki, either. No unnecessary movements. Shiki rarely talked, except when in class. I think this alone explains what kind of a person Shiki is.

Shiki's figure is almost too perfect. Hair, beautiful as silk, cut with scissors like it was a bother and left just like that. It is a short cut just long enough to hide the ears, which suits Shiki so much that many students mistake Shiki's sex. Shiki looks so handsome that she looks like a female to men and is mistaken as a male by women. The word beautiful doesn't quite fit her, though. It‘s more like she looks dignified.

But much more than Shiki's looks, what captivated me the most were her eyes. Those eyes have a sharp yet calm look, and her thin brows intensify it. With her eyes, she gazed upon things invisible to us, and that is what made the person named Ryougi Shiki so special to me.

Yes.

Until that thing happened to Shiki.

◇

"Jumping down."

"Er— Sorry, didn't hear what you said."

"Suicide by jumping off something. Would that be considered an accident, Mikiya?" He gathered his thoughts after that meaningless muttering and seriously started thinking about the question.

"Hm, I'm sure it's an accident, but you're right. I wonder what that is. So long as it's the person's will to do so, the blame is only on that person. But falling from a high place could be considered an accident."

"Then it's not a murder, nor is it an accidental death. It's really ambiguous, if you say it this way. Though they should have picked a way that wouldn't trouble others if they were going to kill themselves."

"Shiki, it's not right to talk ill of the dead," Mikiya said flatly. His words are so utterly predictable.

"Kokuto, I hate your common sense talk." Naturally, my response gets a bit harsh, but Mikiya does not seem upset by it.

"Wow, it’s been a long time since you called me that."

"Really?"

Mikiya nods.

He can be called two ways: Kokutou and Mikiya. I don't like the sound of Kokuto, although I don't exactly know why. In the small silence that formed during my pondering, Mikiya clapped his hand as if he remembered something.

"Oh, speaking of uncommon things, my sister Azaka saw it."

"Saw what?"

"That thing. The girl at the Fujou building, the one they say is flying in the air. You said you saw it once too."

Oh, I remember now. The ghost story that started around three weeks ago. As the story has it, there's an expensive mansion in the office district called the Fujou building. At night, a human-like form can be seen floating above the building. The fact that not only I, but Azaka as well, saw it must mean the thing is real.

After being in a coma for two years from that traffic accident, I was able to see things that were not supposed to be there. As Touko would put it, I am not seeing them but rather "observing" them. In other words, it seems that I am able to perceive things at a higher level with my eyes and brain, but I don't care about all the reasons or explanations behind this.

"The thing at the Fujou building, I've seen it not only once but many times. Though I haven't been around there for a while, so I don't know if it can still be observed or not."

Mikiya responded, "I see. I go by there a lot, but I never saw the ghost."

"You can't see it 'cause you're wearing glasses."

"I don't think glasses matter," Mikiya frowns. His reaction was so warm and pure. That's probably why it's harder for him to see those kinds of things. Even so, boring incidents keep on happening like people falling and flying.

I didn't understand the meaning behind the thought, so I said a question out loud, "Mikiya, do you know why people fly?"

Mikiya shrugs.

"I don't know why they fly or fall," he said, "because I've never done any of them, not even once."

So matter-of-factly, and so coolly said.

／2

On the night at the end of August, I decided to take a walk.

The air is a bit cold for the end of a summer. The last train has already left and the town is quiet.

It's cold, quiet and old, just like a dead city. Even the passing people seem cold and artificial like photos. It reminded me of an incurable disease.

... Disease, illness, sickening.

Everything, the dim houses, the illuminated convenience stores... everything seemed as if it would crumble if it let its guard down.

In it all, the moon shines through the night.

In this world where everything is lifeless, it seems like the moon is the only thing alive, and it hurts my eyes.

... That's what I mean by sickening

When I left the house, I put on a red leather jacket over my light blue kimono.

The kimono gets trapped inside the jacket and burns my body.

But it's still not hot... no, rather...

For me, it was never cold to begin with.

---- Even though it's midnight, if you walk, you see some people.

A man hurrying down the street with his face down.

A young man pondering in front of a vending machine.

Many people hanging out in front of the convenience store.

I tried to figure out what reasons they had for being there, but I never did figure it out, being just an outsider.

First of all, there was no meaning behind me walking by myself out late at night.

I'm just repeating what I used to do before.

... Two years ago.

I, Ryougi Shiki, was about to head up to my second year in high school when I got in an accident. I was carried straight to the hospital.

I heard that my body didn't get any serious wounds, but the damage was concentrated on my head.

Since then, I was in a coma.

Maybe because my body was uninjured, the hospital kept me alive, and my meaningless body also tried to live on.

And finally, about two months ago, Ryougi Shiki recovered.

I guess the doctors were shocked - it was as if a corpse had come back to life. I see, that tells me how much they expected my recovery.

And myself too, I was shocked for another reason.

My memory before my waking up is a bit weird.

To put it simply, I cannot trust the memories I have.

This is different from memory disorder, or rather what people usually call amnesia.

According to Touko, memory is composed of four systems that the brain operates: writing, saving, replaying, and recognizing.

"Writing" is to take what you see and to write it into your brain as information.

"Saving" is to keep that information stored.

"Replaying" is to recall the stored information. In other words, remembering.

"Recognizing" is to confirm that the information recalled is the same as the event that actually occurred.

If one cannot perform any one of these processes, one has a memory disorder. Of course, depending on which system is dysfunctional, the case of memory disorder will vary.

But in my case, all these functions are working properly. I can't really feel my previous memories as my own, but the function of "recognizing" is working properly as I can tell that the memory is indeed the same as what I've experienced before.

But still, I could not be confident about my previous self. I could not feel that I am who I was.

Even if I do remember my memory as Ryougi Shiki, I can only recognize the memory as someone else's. Even though there's no doubt that I'm Ryougi Shiki.

The two years of emptiness has reduced Ryougi Shiki into nothing.

Unlike what society thinks, it has caused what's inside of me to crumble into nothing. My memory and the personality I should have had... the connection was utterly destroyed.

With that being the case, my memory became nothing but an image.

But because of that image, I am able to act like I used to. I can communicate with the people I knew and my parents as the Ryougi Shiki they knew, but without any concern for my real feelings.

To be honest, that troubles me so much that I can almost not stand the pain.

..... It's just mimicry I'm not living at all.

Just like a newborn baby. I don't know anything and I haven't experienced anything. But the memory of the past eighteen years has made me into a complete human.

I already have the emotions people originally learn from experiencing many events as my memory. But I have not actually experienced them. But even if I wanted to experience them, I already know about them. There is no amazement, no feeling of being alive. ... Just like being unable to be surprised by a magic trick which you already know.

And just like that, I continue to act like I used to without feeling that I'm alive.

The reason is simple.

Because if I do so, I might be able to return to my previous self.

Because if I act like that, I might figure out the reason why I take these walks late at night.

... Oh, I see.

Then you could say that I am in love with my previous self.

◇

Looking up after noticing that I have walked a long way, I find out that I am in the office district.

Buildings of the same height are standing side-by-side along the road in a well-mannered fashion. The surface of the buildings is filled with glass windows, and they are only reflecting the moonlight right now.

In the darkness, the large mirrors created by the buildings are reflecting each others' figures hazily.

It's a quiet night tonight.

The group of buildings by the main street is like a world of shadows in which monsters roam around.

Deep in it, there is a shadow taller than the rest. That building, like a twenty-story-high ladder, looked like a tower reaching for the moon.

The name of the tower is Fujou.

There are no lights on in the mansion called the Fujou building. The residents are probably all asleep. Probably because it's already almost two in the morning.

At that instant, an uninteresting shadow caught my eyes.

A silhouette of a girl floats into my vision. Not metaphorically, the girl is literally floating.

There is no wind.

The coldness in the air is abnormal for summer.

The bone in my nape creaks from the cold.

Of course, it's just my imagination.

"I see. So you're here today too."

I don't like it, but nothing can be done about what I can see.

And like that, the girl we were talking about was flying as if she were lying on the moon.

／Overlooking View／

-------The image is that of a dragonfly. Busily flying.

A butterfly came to follow, but I didn't slow down. The butterfly eventually could not keep up and fell as it was about to go out of my vision.

It falls in an arc.

The falling motion like that of a snake; it looked like a broken lily.

That image is a really sad one.

Even though we cannot go together, I should have at least stayed by its side a bit longer.

But that is impossible. Because, since I do not have my feet on the ground, I do not even have the freedom to stand and stop.

Since I could hear someone talking, I decide to get up.

... My eyelids are pretty heavy. This is proof that I still need two more hours of sleep.

As I think to myself that I am petty for still trying to wake up in that state, my will has won over my sleepiness.

... Really, I'm troubled at how simple I am.

I think I finished up writing the drawing plan after working on it all night, and went to sleep in Touko-san's room.

When I raised myself from the sofa, I was indeed in the office. In the summer sunlight, Shiki and Touko-san seem to be talking about something.

Shiki is leaning on a wall while standing up, and Touko-san is sitting cross-legged on a chair.

"Morning, Kokuto"

The look on Touko-san's face, which is more like a glare, is normal. ... Seeing that she has her glasses off, I guess she was talking with Shiki about "those" kinds of things.

On the note of being usual, she is dressed like the usual too.

With her hair short and her neck showing, Touko-san looks like a secretary. But since her glare looks so scary, I bet she won't ever get that kind of a position.

The black thin pants and the seemingly new white shirt suit her.

"Sorry, I guess I fell asleep."

I try to make up an excuse.

"Don't explain the obvious. I can tell."

Cutting me off like that, she takes her cigarette to her mouth.

"If you're awake, go make something to drink. It should be a good rehabilitation."

"……?"

She must mean reformation when she says rehabilitation.

I don't know why she would say that to me, but since Touko-san is always like that, I decide not to question her.

"Do you want anything, Shiki?"

"I'm fine. I'm going to bed soon."

Saying so, Shiki does indeed seem to be lacking sleep.

Maybe she took a walk last night after I left.

◇

Next to the room which is Touko-san's room and the office is a room like a kitchen.

The sink has three faucets in a row - maybe it used to be a lab or something. Two of those have metal wires wrapped around them and are not for use. The reason for that is unknown to me; under closer examination, it makes me feel slightly the way boxers feel when they are trying to lose weight, but they don't get many thanks because they start to feel violent.

Well, I turn the coffee maker on to make coffee for the two of us. I do so very efficiently. I'm already a master at brewing coffee. But it's not like I'm working here to make tea or coffee...

It's been half a year since I got employed here.

No, the word "employed" is not right because this place is not even a functional workplace.

To come here prepared even for that, it is probably because I fell in love with that person's work.

After Shiki stopped time at the age of seventeen, I graduated high school and entered college without a purpose.

It was a promise made with Shiki to enter that college.

Even if Shiki had little hope of recovery, I still wanted to keep that promise.

But nothing was there for me after that. After I became a college student, I just lived through the days.

While I was living aimlessly like that, I went to an exhibit I was invited to, and ended up finding a doll.

It was a doll made so delicately, it seemed to be at the limits of a man's skills. It was like a frozen human, yet at the same time it was clear that it was simply a human-shaped mannequin which would never move.

But it was just too beautiful...

A human about to start moving any second now. But a doll which does not have any life to begin with. A place where only things with life can reach, yet a place where no human can reach...

I fell in love with that ambivalence.

Probably because everything about its existence was exactly like Shiki back then.

It was unknown where the doll came from.

The pamphlet did not even mention its existence.

When I desperately looked for the source, I found out that it was made by a volunteer and the crafter was one surrounded by much rumor in the industry.

The crafter - whose name is Aozaki Touko - is a hermit, to put it simply. I guess her true job is doll-making, but it seems she designs buildings too.

She will do anything that involves making something, but never accepts any requests. She will always go to someone and show them what she will make; she would start making it once she has received the payment up front.

She is either an eminent virtuoso, or just a big weirdo.

I got more and more curious, and I knew I shouldn't have, but I found out the address of this weirdo (A claim which I can now assert with the utmost confidence...)

It was away from the city and it was an ambiguous address not in the residential district or the industrial district.

It wasn't even a house.

It was an abandoned building.

And it's not just a normal abandoned building. Its construction was started a few years ago, but came to a halt halfway through when the previously prolific economy began to fail. Its shape as a building is present, but the interior is totally unfurnished, and the walls and the floors are completely bare.

It would have been six stories high upon completion, but there's nothing above the fourth floor. Nowadays, it's more efficient to start building from the top floor, but I guess it was still using the old construction method back then. Since the construction was stopped halfway, the half-done fifth floor became like the rooftop.

Even though the building is surrounded by a tall concrete wall, it's easy to get into. It's a miracle some kids didn't make a secret base out of it.

Anyway, I guess Aozaki Touko bought this abandoned building.

The kitchen-like room I'm in right now is on the fourth floor. The second and the third floors are like Touko-san's workspace, so we usually talk on the fourth floor.

...Let's get back on topic.

After that, I got to know Touko-san and I ended up working here, quitting the college I had just gotten into.

Incredibly, I get paid here.

As Touko-san puts it, there are two types of people with one of two attributes: the one to make and the one to search, the one to use and the one to destroy.

She told me frankly that I had no hope as the one to make, but she still hired me. She said that I had the ability as the one to search or whatnot.

"You're slow, Kokuto."

...I hear that from the next room.

Looking, I notice that the coffee maker is already filled with the black liquid.

◇

"I guess the one yesterday makes eight. People should start to notice the similarities by now."

Putting out her cigarette, Touko-san suddenly says.

She must be talking about the recent recurrent suicides of female high-school students, throwing themselves off high buildings.

I think so because there's nothing else she would want to talk about, this summer being free as it is of any issues such as water shortages.

"Huh? Wasn't it six?"

"There were more while you were dozing off. It started in June, and it's averaging about three per month. Maybe there'll be one more within the next three days."

Touko-san says something sickening. Taking a look at the calendar, August will come to an end in three days. Three more days...?

Something about that caught my attention, but it faded away quickly.

"But I heard they are all unrelated. The girls who committed suicide are all supposedly from different schools with no connection to each other. It might be that the police are hiding the facts, though."

"You're not trusting people? That's unlike you."

Touko-san grins.

...With her glasses off, she can be infinitely mean.

"Because not one will has been televised. Six, no, eight people. If there're that many, at least one should have left behind a will. But if the police have not said anything about it, you'd think they are hiding them."

"I'm saying that's the relation. Or I should say "the connection point". Out of the eight, more than half are seen jumping off by themselves, by several people, but they are unable to find anything wrong with their private lives. It's not like they were doing drugs or affiliated with a weird religion. It's definitely a case of suicide where they felt uneasy about themselves and selfishly took their own lives. That's probably why the cops aren't taking a big interest in this matter."

"Are you saying that there was no will from the beginning?"

After I say so doubtfully, Touko-san nods but says that she can't be too sure.

But could that be possible?

There's an inconsistency somewhere, I think as I take the coffee mug and taste the bitterness of the liquid inside.

Why would there be no will? If there is no will, people usually wouldn't kill themselves.

A will is an attachment to the real world. When a person who does not like to die is forced to die, the will is what they leave behind as a reason for their death.

A suicide without a will.

To have no need to write a will means they have nothing to leave to this world, and are willing to disappear without a trace. That would be the perfect suicide. I think a perfect suicide would be one without a will and even the death itself would not be found out.

But committing suicide by jumping off a building is not a perfect suicide. To die in a way to catch people's attention seems in itself a will.

Then what?

Maybe it's for a different reason... like someone stole their will? No, then that would not be a suicide.

Then what?

There's only one logical answer I can think of.

Like it sounds, maybe those were just accidents.

The girls had no intention of dying from the beginning. Then there would be no reason to write a will. It's like getting involved in an unfortunate accident while going outside for a bit.

Just like what Shiki said last night.

...But I could not come up with a reason why they would jump off a building when they were just going out for a bit.

"The suicides will end at eight. There won't be any more for a while."

Shiki comes into the conversation as if to interrupt my raging thoughts.

Even though Shiki seems to be uninterested in this subject.

"You can tell?"

I had to ask.

Shiki nods while looking far away.

"I went and looked. There were eight flying about."

The well-shaped lips let out those words.

"Oh, so there were that many at that building. You knew from the beginning how many there were, Shiki?"

"Yeah, I finished it off but I think those girls will stay there for a while, even though I don't like that idea. Hey, Touko. Do all the people end up that way when they can fly a bit like that?"

"I don't know. You can't say for sure since everyone's different but in the past, of those who have attempted to fly with just human powers, none have succeeded. The words "fly" and "fall" are tied together. But the more you're hooked to flying, the more you forget about that fact. As a result, you end up trying to reach the skies even after you die. Not falling to the ground, but falling toward the sky."

Shiki frowns at Touko-san's response.

Shiki's angry... but at what?

"Sorry, but I don't quite follow the conversation."

"Hmm? We're talking about the ghost of the Fujou building. Although I can't say for sure if it's just an image or a real thing unless I take a look at it. I was thinking of going to take a look at it if I had the time, but if Shiki's already killed it, there's no way for me to check now."

... I see. As I expected, they were talking about "those" kinds of things.

When Shiki and Touko-san without her glasses talk together, they usually talk about these occult-like things.

"You heard the story that Shiki saw the girl floating at the Fujou building, right? That story had more to it and it seems there's a human-like figure flying around those floating girls. We were thinking that since they won't stray from the Fujou building, maybe that place was like a net or something."

I'm troubled at how complex and weird the story has become.

As if Touko-san can tell my confusion, she sums up the whole thing.

"In other words, there's one floating human at the Fujou building and around it are the girls who died by suicide. These girls are probably something like ghosts. That's pretty much it."

I nod.

I understand the story but I guess I'm hearing it after it's all over.

Judging from the way Shiki talked, it seems the ghost thing was already taken care of.

It's been two month since I let these two meet. I'm starting to become the one to hear about the results when it comes to these kinds of tales.

As a normal human being different from these two, I'd like to stay away from those stories. On the other hand, since it doesn't suit me to be ignored, I think this neutral stance I'm holding right now is perfect.

I guess people call this good news within bad news.

◇

"……?"

Shiki gets angrier and starts to glare at me.

Have I done something to make Shiki mad?

"Huh? But Shiki saw the ghosts there at the beginning of July, right? Then there were only four ghosts back then?"

I say the obvious just to confirm, but Shiki says no.

"Eight. There were eight from the beginning. Like I told you, there won't be any more after eight. In their case, the order is the opposite."

"Then you're saying you saw eight ghosts from the start? Like that one clairvoyant girl?"

"No way. I'm normal. It's just that the air there is abnormal. Let's see... it feels weird. Like hot and cold water right next to each other."

Touko-san follows-up Shiki's ambiguous words.

"So in other words, time there is not working properly. It's not like there's only one way for time to pass by. The time it takes for something to rot away is unfairly different for everything. Then, it should follow that a human individual and its memory take different times to disappear. When someone dies, does that person's memory disappear? It doesn't, right? As long as there are observers, ones to remember, nothing disappears instantly, but gradually fades away.

“Memories, or rather, "records". If an observer happens to be in the environment around that person, people like those girls will be preserved by their memories and walk the earth as "illusions" even after their deaths. This is part of the phenomenon which we know as "ghosts". The only ones who see these projections are the ones that share the memories with these ghosts, namely their parents and friends. Shiki, however, is an exception.

"Of course, the passage of time does affect these "records", but at the top of that building, it seems to occur at a much slower rate. The girls' memories from when they were alive have not caught up to their true state yet.

"As a result, the memories stay alive. What can be seen there are the actions and the existences of those girls whose time happens to be passing by slowly."

Then, Touko-san lights another cigarette.

So she is saying that when something goes away, as long as I remember it, it has not disappeared. Thus, the very act of me remembering it causes it to be alive. So if it's alive, it can be seen?

That's just like hallucination... No, Touko-san probably used the word "illusion" because it is defined as something that isn't real.

"I don't care about all that explanation - there's no danger in that. The problem is *her*. I know I got that thing good, but if there's a main body somewhere else, we'll just end up repeating this over and over again. I'm tired of being Mikiya's bodyguard."

"I feel the same way. I'll take care of Fujou Kirie. You can just take Kokutou home. There's about five more hours until he's off work. If you're going to sleep, you can use the floor there."

The place Touko-san points at is a place that has not been cleaned for the past year and is like a dirty furnace.

Of course, Shiki ignores her.

"So, what was that anyway?"

Shiki glares at Touko-san.

The wizard with a cigarette in her mouth thinks to herself and walks over to the window.

From there, she looks outside.

There is no lighting in this room. We only get the light from outside and it's hard to tell if its morning or afternoon in here.

In contrast, the view outside the window is clearly mid-day. You could almost see the blazing-hot white sunlight.

Touko-san stares at the summer scenery for a while.

"Before, you could classify her as flying."

The smoke she blows out mixes in with the white sunlight.

I stare at her back as she looks outside... She's like a mirage in all this white.

"Kokuto, what do you think a view from a high place reminds you of?"

This sudden question pulls me back into reality.

I haven't really been at a high place since I went to the Tokyo Tower as a child. I don't really remember what I thought about it then. The only thing I know is that I tried so hard to spot the place where I lived, but ended up not being able to find it.

"Maybe, something small?"

"That's too shrewd of a remark, Kokuto."

A cold response comes back. Well, I was a bit doubtful about my remark myself. I pull myself together and try to think of something else.

"Let's see. There isn't much that it reminds me of, but I do think it's beautiful. A view from a high place is overwhelming."

Probably because this response was more from my heart, Touko-san nods in agreement.

While still staring outside, Touko-san continues to talk.

"The scenery you see is magnificent: even an ordinarily boring landscape would look beautiful. But that's not the impulse you feel when you look down onto the world you live in. The overlooking view only gives you one impulse..."

Saying the word "impulse", Touko-san cuts off her sentence.

Impulse is not something that comes from within you like feelings, but rather something that attacks you from the outside. Even if the one attacked by it doesn't want it.

Something like violence that attacks you without warning, that is what we call an "impulse".

Then what is the violence that is brought by an overlooking view?

"That is being 'far'. A vision too big creates a vivid separation between you and the world. People can only feel safe around things close to them. Even if one has the most detailed map and knows exactly where they are, it's only information, right?

“For us, the world is only something we can feel ourselves. The boundaries between cities, countries, and the world can only be unconsciously recognized by our brains, and we ourselves cannot feel them unless we actually go to those. And in reality, there is nothing wrong with that way of recognition.

“But if the vision is too large, discrepancy occurs. The ten meter area around you, that you actually feel, and the ten kilometer area that you are looking down on. They are both the world you live in, yet you feel the first to be more real.

“See? There's already an inconsistency. It's more correct for you to recognize the larger world you see as the world you live in rather than the small space around you. But no matter how hard you try, you cannot feel that you are living on this big world.

“The reason being, what feels more real is always something that is around you. Your reasoning as your knowledge and your experience as your feelings crash against each other and eventually, one will lose and confusion will start.

“...How small the city is from up here. I can't even imagine my house was down there. Was that park shaped that way? I didn't even know that was there. This is like a town I don't know about. It feels like I've come to a place far away.

“... A high perspective brings these kinds of thoughts. Even though the person is still standing on a part of that city they're looking down on..."

A high place is a place far away. That is true, distance-wise. But Touko-san must mean the mental aspect of it.

Two places apart horizontally and vertically. The only difference between the two is if you can or can't look down on the other place.

"So you mean it's not good to keep your vision at a high place?"

"If you go too far. In the ancient times, the sky was considered to be another world. To fly meant going to the other world. You will be drowned in another will if you do not protect yourself by means of technology. Just like it sounds, you go crazy.

“Well, if you do have the right protection on your recognition, you won't be affected that much. It won't be a problem if you have a firm place to stand on. You'll be back to normal when you get back on the ground."

... Now that she mentions it, when I was looking down on the school ground from the rooftop once, I suddenly wondered what would happen if I jumped down.

Of course, it was just a joke.

I had no intention of actually doing so, but why did I get that thought when it obviously leads to death?

Touko-san says there are individual differences, but I think it's common for people to think about falling when at high places.

"Does it mean your mind goes crazy for just an instant?"

Touko-san laughs after I blurt out my question.

"Everyone dreams about the taboo, Kokuto. Humans have the ability to gain pleasure from imagining things they cannot do. But... yeah, that's pretty close. The important thing is that the thought only comes at a specific place - at that place itself. Well, I guess that's pretty obvious. To speak in your case, I think your mind isn't crazy, but rather numb."

"Touko, you've been talking for too long."

Shiki interrupts as if to say she can't stand it anymore. Come to think of it, we might have strayed off the main topic.

"It's not long at all. If you're talking in terms of constructing a discussion topic, we're only on the second part."

"I only want to hear the end. I don't want to hear you guys talk."

"Shiki..."

It's mean, but I guess she also has a point.

Shiki continues to complain, ignoring me.

"And, you say there's a problem with views from high places. Then what is a normal view? Even when we're walking, we have a higher view than the ground."

In contrast to Shiki's attitude of trying to find holes, I thought the argument did have a point.

A person's eyes are certainly at a higher level than the ground. Then that would mean our view is somewhat overlooking the world.

Touko-san nods at Shiki's words. I guess she's just going straight to the conclusion.

"But the ground you think is flat is actually slightly curved. Even taking that into account, you can't say our normal vision has an overlooking view of things.

“A vision is not what your eyes see, but it's an image that your brain comprehends. Our vision is protected by common sense, so we never feel our height to be high, and it's even considered normal. There's no notion that it's high.

"But on the other hand, everyone is living with a vision that is overlooking. Not a physical vision, but I mean our mental vision. Everyone is different, but a larger mind will try to go higher. But still, it will never leave its box.

“Humans are made to live in a box, and they can only survive in the box. Humans cannot have the views of the Gods.

“However, when one's mental vision surpasses a certain boundary, one becomes not so much a God as a monster. *Hypnos*, that is, "illusion", turns into *Thanatos* - real death."

As she says so, Touko-san herself is overlooking the world. She is looking down at the earth with her feet set on the ground. It seems significant, somehow.

And then, I remember the dream I had

The butterfly fell at the end.

Maybe she could have flown more gracefully if she had not tried to follow me.

Yes, if she fluttered as if to float, she should have been able to fly longer.

But since the butterfly knew about flying, it could not stand the lightness of its floating body.

That's why it flew instead of floating.

Thinking that much, I question myself if I was that poetic.

Touko-san, by the window, throws her cigarette away.

"The flicker at the Fujou building might be the world she was seeing. I can guess that the difference in the air Shiki felt was the boundary between the outside world and the inside of the box. That is a discontinuity that only a human mind can perceive."

With Touko-san's talk finished, Shiki finally seemed to relax.

Shiki lets out a breath and looks around.

"Discontinuity, huh? I wonder which side was the warm side and which side was the cold side for her."

In contrast to the serious tone, Shiki acts like it doesn't matter.

Touko-san also acts like she doesn't care.

"Of course, the opposite of you."

And answered so.

→ / 3

---------The bone in my nape creaks.

Is the cold that's making me shiver coming from outside or inside my body?

Leaving what can't be distinguished aside, Shiki keeps walking.

There's no sign of human activity at the Fujou building.

It's two in the morning. Only the white light illuminates the hallway of the mansion. The cream-colored walls are bathed in light and I can see to the end of the hallway. The light which steals away the darkness feels eerily artificial and unnatural.

Passing by the card checker at the entrance, I enter the elevator.

It's empty inside. A mirror is bolted to the rear panel of the elevator for the convenience of the passenger. Watching me with lazy eyes from the inside of the mirror is someone wearing a black leather jacket over a light blue kimono. Eyes that look like they care about nothing.

Shiki glances at the figure in the mirror, and pushes the button that says "R". With a small start-up sound, the world around Shiki rises. The motor-driven box will reach the top floor in a matter of seconds.

It is a closed-off room for the time being. Nothing occurring outside right now concerns Shiki, and it is impossible to be concerned with the outside world. That feeling seeps into the supposedly empty mind. This small box is the only world I'm supposed to feel right now.

The door opens without a sound. What's outside is a totally different world, a world of darkness.

After arriving at the annex, containing only the door leading to the rooftop, the elevator leaves Shiki and descends back towards the first floor. There are no lights, and the surroundings are painfully dark.

Heading across the small room, Shiki pushes open the door to the rooftop.

... The deep darkness becomes faint.

The outline of the city fills my vision.

The rooftop of the Fujou building is a plain one. The floor is made of flat concrete, and there is a fence that surrounds the perimeter of the roof. A solitary water tower stands atop the annex, but there is nothing else particularly significant.

The rooftop itself is a plain one, but the view from it is out of this world.

The view of the night town from this building that is at least ten stories higher than its surroundings feels perhaps more lonely than beautiful. It feels like you're on top of a tall ladder looking down onto the world. The depths of this sea view, however, are certainly beautiful. The electric lights dotted here and there give off a warm luminescence like that of an anglerfish.

If my view right now is that of the whole world, then the world right now is indeed asleep, as if eternally, but fortunately it's only temporary. The silence tightens my heart more than any coldness, and it is rather painful...

The coldness of the night sky stands out just much as the coldness below. If the town is the deep sea, then the sky is just pure darkness. In the darkness, stars glitter like jewels. The moon is a void in this darkness - a large hole in a big black canvas known as the night sky. So that thing is really not a mirror of the sun, but rather a view of "the other side"... That's what I heard at the house of the Ryougi. According to them, the moon is a gate to another world.

Since ancient times, the moon has carried magic, women, and death. And with that moon behind it, a human form is floating...

... With eight girls flying around it.

◇

The white figure in the night sky is that of a woman. She wears a fancy white garment that one might mistake for a dress, and has long black hair reaching down to her waist. Her arms and legs are slender, and they make this woman look even more beautiful.

The thin brow and the cold eyes are beautiful. I can estimate she's in her twenties. Although it's doubtful that you can fit an age meant for a living being onto something like a ghost.

But the white woman is not abstract like a ghost. She is really there. The girls aimlessly flocking around the woman seem to match the definition of "ghost" better than her; their lazy floating makes them seem more like they are swimming than flying. Even their figures and forms are abstract, as they flicker into transparency from time to time.

What's above Shiki right now are the white woman and the girls floating as if to protect her.

The whole sight is not horrifying. No, this is more like...

"Hmph, this is indeed demonic."

Shiki sneers.

This woman's beauty is no longer that of a human's. Her black hair is especially luxurious, each strand with a silken sheen and texture. If the wind were stronger, her figure with hair flowing about it would have been a profoundly beautiful image.

"Then I shall have to kill you"

Perhaps hearing Shiki's murmur, the woman looks down. The woman is four meters above this rooftop which is already over forty meters high. The woman's and Shiki's gazes meet.

There are no words to speak, nor is there a language to communicate with.

Shiki reaches a hand into her leather jacket and draws a knife. A small sword by any other name, with a blade perhaps some eighteen centimeters long.

Shiki's consciousness is filled by the killing intent of the gaze piercing down from above her.

The white figure sways. Her arm flows and a slender finger points at Shiki. That slender, fragile arm does not remind Shiki of *white*.

"... More like bones, or a lily"

In the windless night, her voice hung in the air for a long time.

---- The will put into the fingertip is the intent to kill.

The white fingertip points at Shiki.

Shiki's head sways. The thin body steps once to regain its balance. But only once.

"---------"

The woman overhead hesitated a bit from that.

The *suggestion* that "you can fly" is not working on this person.

Her power can give someone the impression that "they were flying" - more of a brainwashing than a "suggestion" by any normal definition. There is no way to fight it, and as a result, one actually tries to fly, or conversely runs away from the fear of being able to fly. But Shiki was able to withstand it with just a small daze.

"---------"

The woman wonders if the contact was too weak, and decides to use *suggestion* again.

But this time, stronger. Not a weak impression like "You can fly" but she orders firmly: "You have to fly!"

But before that, Shiki looks at the woman.

One on each of her legs, one on her back, and one point on her left chest. The cutting section named death *can be certainly seen. The one on her chest would be a good one to aim for. That would be an instant kill. Whether this woman is an illusion or something else, as long as it's alive, even if it were a god, I'll kill it.*

Bringing the knife to bear in a firm reverse grip, Shiki glares at the enemy in the sky.

The impulse assails Shiki once more.

...I can fly. I can fly. I liked the sky from before. I was flying yesterday too. I could probably fly higher today. Freely. Feeling peaceful. Laughing. I have to go quickly...

Where? To the sky? Free? ... That's...

Escape from reality. Yearn for the sky. Reaction to gravity. No feet on ground. Flight under unconsciousness.

Let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go---------- GO!

"You've got to be kidding me."

Saying that, Shiki raises the empty left hand.

The suggestion does not work anymore. Shiki is not even fazed.

"I don't have that kind of admiration for the sky. I don't feel alive, so I don't know the pain of living. To be honest, I don't care about you at all."

...A murmur more like singing.

Shiki does not feel any restraint, joy or sorrow in life.

That's why Shiki is not attracted to the liberation from pain.

"But I don't like you keeping him. I got him first, so I'm taking him back."

Shiki's left hand grabs the empty air and pulls back.

As if being pulled by the left hand, the woman and the girls are pulled toward Shiki like fish being reeled in with a net.

"---------!"

The woman's expression changes. She puts more resolve into her will and pounds it against Shiki.

If she could communicate with Shiki, she would have screamed

"Fall!"

Ignoring the curse, Shiki responds in an icy tone.

"You fall."

The knife drives into the chest of the woman as she is forced downwards. As simply and swiftly as slicing through a fruit, and with such precision that even the woman feels a brief glimpse of admiration.

There is no blood.

The woman, unable to move from the shock of the knife transfixing her chest, convulses just once.

Shiki casually throws the corpse over the tall fence, into the depths of the dark city.

The woman tumbles past the bounds of the rooftop and falls without a sound. Her dark, silken hair does not flutter, even during the fall, and fades into the night as her white robes are lost to the wind.

Like a white flower sinking deep into the ocean.

Shiki leaves the rooftop.

Above, the floating girls still remain.

／4

I wake up after having a knife stabbed through my chest. The impact was tremendous. That person must have been really strong to pierce someone's chest that easily. That said, it was not a violent excess of power. It did not do anything unnecessary, and slipped straight between the bones and the muscle as if they were nothing. What a sense of unity!

The feeling of death that runs through my body. I hear the sound of my heart being pierced and ripped. The "feeling" of it hurt me more than the pain itself, because that sensation was a fear and pleasure incomparable to anything else.

The chill running through my spine is mind-boggling, and my whole body is trembling. There exists uneasiness, loneliness, and the will to live, and I cried without a sound.

Not because of fear or pain.

It's because this unfamiliar feeling of death was there... Even for me, who every night wishes to be alive come sunrise.

I will never be able to escape this feeling

Since I have fallen in love with this feeling...

◇

I hear the door open. The clock shows the time to be two in the afternoon, and it feels as if the sun is blazing through the closed window. It's not yet time for the examination, so maybe it's a visitor.

I have my own hospital room and there is no one else in here. What's here is the bright sunlight, curtains that never flutter in the wind, and this bed.

"Excuse me, Are you Fujou Kirie?"

It seems the visitor is a woman. Greeting me with a husky voice, she comes near me without sitting down or anything. It seems she's looking down at me. Her stare feels cold.

...This person is a scary person. She will probably bring about my destruction.

But I actually feel happy inside, since it's been many years since I've had a visitor. I cannot bear to turn anyone away, even if the one who comes visiting was Death himself to finish me off.

"You are my enemy, right?"

The woman nods.

I try to focus and somehow see this visitor.

...It may be because of the strong sunlight, but I can only see her silhouette. She is not wearing a jacket, but her pressed, wrinkle-free suit makes her look like a teacher and causes me to relax somewhat. Nonetheless, her orange tie is rather flashy for her white shirt, so I have to take some points off for that.

"Do you know that person, or are you that person?"

"No, I'm an acquaintance of both the one who attacked you and the one you attacked. We, you included, made contact with the weirdest people. We must be pretty unlucky."

Saying that, the woman takes out something from her pocket and puts it right back.

"I forgot you can't smoke in here. In addition, it seems your lungs are bad. The smoke would do you nothing but harm."

She sounds regretful. I guess it was a cigarette box she took out. I've never even touched one before, but I wanted to see this person smoke. Probably... no, surely it would suit her well. Like a pair of lizard-skin pants on a showcase mannequin.

"It's not just your lungs that are bad. That must be the reason, but there are lots of tumors all over your body. Starting with sarcoma, it's worse inside. It seems that hair of yours is the only thing normal. But it's amazing how much strength you have left. A normal person would have died before it got this bad. ... How many years has it been, Fujou Kirie?"

She is probably asking about my hospitalization, but I cannot answer her.

"I don't know. I stopped keeping track."

Because it's meaningless. Because I won't be getting out of here until I die.

The woman nods and says, "I see."

I don't like her tone, as it contains no sympathy or dislike. The only thing I get from people is sympathy, but this person is not willing to give me even that.

"Is the place Shiki cut all right? I heard Shiki cut you around the heart area, near the main artery... I would assume it was in your bicuspid valve."

She says an amazing thing with a normal tone. I let out a smile as a testament to her weirdness.

"What a strange person. I wouldn't be able to talk to you like this if my heart had been cut."

"Of course. That was just for confirmation."

I see. With that question she confirmed if I was the woman stabbed by that person who I couldn't classify as Japanese-styled or Western-styled.

"But the effect will come in time, Shiki's eyes are strong. Even if that thing was your second existence, the destruction will reach you in time. I wanted to ask you a few things before that... which is why I came here."

Second existence... She must mean that other me.

"I haven't seen you actually floating. Can you tell me what that was?"

"I don't know either. The only view I can see is this view out of this window.

“But maybe that was bad.

“I've been looking down at the world from here. The trees showing the colors of the four seasons, people coming to the hospital in turns.

“They cannot hear me even if I talk, and I cannot reach them no matter how far I stretch out my hands. I have been suffering all this time inside this room. I have been loathing this view for a long time. Isn't that what you would call curseing?"

"I see, it must be your Fujou blood. Your bloodline is that of an old pure family. It seems they were specialized in prayers, but I see that their true powers were in curses. The name ‘Fujou’ might come from the word ‘impure’"

Bloodline.

My family. But that came to an end a few years ago. Soon after I was hospitalized, my parents and my brother died in an accident. Since then, a friend of my father has been paying for my medical expenses.

"A curse is not something that is woven unconsciously. What did you wish for?"

...I don't know myself. Even she wouldn't know.

"...Have you ever longed for the outside world for a long time? For so many years that you lose touch with reality? I hated, despised, and feared the outside world. I was overlooking it all the time. After a while, my eyes became weird. I was in the sky above that garden, and was overlooking the world below. It was a feeling like my eyes were flying around while my body and mind were still here. But since I can't move from here, all I can do is to overlook the area around here.”

"You must have imprinted the surrounding scenery into your mind. If that's the case, you should be able to think that you can see it from all directions... You started to lose your vision around that time too?"

I'm surprised. She knows I'm on the verge of losing my vision.

I nod.

"That's right. The world turned white and in the end, nothing was there. At first, I thought everything turned into darkness, but that was wrong."

Everything disappeared, or at least everything that could be seen.

But I have no problem with that, because my eyes are already flying around. I can only see the scenery around this hospital, and I can't get out of here anyway.

"Nothing changed, nothing..."

Then, I cough. It's been a long time since I've talked this much, so my throat is burning.

"I see. So your mind was up in the sky. But then... why are you alive? If that ghost at the Fujou building was your mind, you should have been killed by Shiki."

Yes, I am wondering the same thing.

That person... I guess the name is Shiki... How was that person able to cut me?

That floating me cannot touch anything. In return, I cannot be touched by anything, but that person killed me as if I had a real body.

"Answer me. The you at the Fujou building, was that really Fujou Kirie?"

"The me at the Fujou building isn't me. Myself looking at the sky and myself in the sky, 'that me' gave up on me and flew away. I have been left behind even by myself."

The woman gasps. For the first time, she showed her emotion.

"So it's not that your personality split up. There was someone that gave you, who had one container, a second container. I see, you controlled two bodies with one mind. This is indeed nothing like before."

Now that she says so, that might have been the case.

I gave up on myself and was looking down on the world. But neither one of us could put our feet on the ground, and just ended up floating around. Since I am rejected by the world outside this window, there is no way for me to go out there no matter how much I wish for it.

It must mean that we were connected in the end.

"That makes sense. But why weren't you happy with just imagining the outside world? I don't think there was a need to let those girls fall."

Those girls...? Oh, I see, the girls I was jealous of. They were unfortunate. But I did not do anything, because the girls fell on their own.

"The you at the Fujou building was more like a will. You used that, huh? Those girls were able to fly from the beginning, right? Even if it was just an image in their head, or if they really had the power to fly. People flying in their sleep isn't rare, but it never gets to be a problem. Why? Because they only do so in their sleep and they never even think about flying when they are awake. Since they are unconscious, they have no evil will when they are flying.

"Those girls were special even in that case. We're not talking Peter Pan, but it's easier to fly when you're small. Maybe one or two might have actually floated, but most of them should have floated only in their dreams.

"But you made them think about it. You gave them the impression they had while they were dreaming when they were awake.

"As a result, they found out they could fly. Yes, they can fly... but only unconsciously. Flight with only human power is difficult. Even I cannot fly without a broom. The chance of flight under consciousness is about thirty percent. The girls tried to fly as usual, and fell as they were supposed to."

Yes, they were flying around me. I thought they could be my friends. But all they did was float around me like fishes without noticing me.

It was shortly after that I found out they had no consciousness. I just thought they would notice me if they had consciousness. That was the only reason, so why...

"Are you cold? You're trembling."

The woman's voice is cold like plastic.

I embrace myself as the chill does not go away.

"Let me ask you one more thing. Why did you admire the sky? You hated the outside world."

That's probably because...

"There is no end to the sky. I thought there would be a world I wouldn't hate if I could go as far as I wanted, if I could fly as far as I wanted."

The voice asks me if I found that world.

My chill does not stop. I tremble as if someone's shaking me, and my eyes are getting hotter.

I nod.

"...Every night, I feared I wouldn't be able to wake up the next day, I was scared I wouldn't live until tomorrow. I knew I wouldn't have the strength to wake up if I fell asleep.

“The days like a tightrope were only filled with fear of death. But because of that, I could feel that I was alive.

“I could only smell death every day, but to live, only that smell was reliable.

“Since I am nothing but a discarded shell, I can only feel alive when I am facing death."

That's right. That is why I like death more than life.

To fly anywhere, to go to anywhere I want...

"You took my boy as a companion to death?"

"No. At that time, I didn't know. I was attached to life and I wanted to fly while being alive. I should have been able to do so with him."

"You and Shiki are similar. You guys have a bit of salvation in that you guys both chose Kokuto. It's not a bad thing to search for the feeling of being alive in someone else."

Kokuto. I see, so that Shiki person came to take him back.

I guess my savior was also my death. I have no regret in that though.

"That person is really childish. He is always so straight. That's why he should be able to fly to anywhere he wants if he tries.

“... I wanted for him to take me."

My eyes are hot. I don't get it, but I'm probably crying.

Not because I'm sad... If I could really go somewhere with him, how much happiness would that have been? It's something that wouldn't come true, because it's a dream that shouldn't come true, that's why it's so beautiful that it makes me cry. That is the only dream I've had in the past few years.

"But Kokutou has no interest in the sky. The more one wants the sky, the farther they are from it, huh? How ironic."

"You're right. I have heard that humans have many things they don't need. I was only able to float. I could not fly, and all I managed was to stay floating."

The burning in my eyes disappeared. Probably, this will never again happen in the future.

What's controlling me right now is only this chill inside of me.

"Sorry to be a bother. This is the last question, but what will you do now? I can heal that wound Shiki gave you."

Without answering, I shake my head. It seems the woman frowned a bit.

"I see...

“There are two ways to escape. Escape without purpose, and escape with a purpose. You call the former floating and the latter flight.

“You are the one to decide which one your overlooking view was. But if you choose one out of guilt, that's wrong. You shouldn't choose the path ahead of you based on the sins you carry, but rather, you should carry the sins on the path you choose."

Then the woman leaves. The woman has not told me her name, but I know there was no need to.

... She must have known what I would choose from the beginning. Because I could not fly, and all I could do was to float.

Since I'm weak, I cannot do as she said. That's why I cannot overcome this temptation. The flash of light I felt when I was stabbed in my heart. The overwhelming torrent of death and the beat of life. I always thought I had nothing, but there is still that simple thing left in me.

What's there is death.

This fear that sends a chill down my spine. I have to feel the most death I can to feel the happiness of life. For everything in my life I have ignored until now. But it probably would be impossible to die like I did that night. I probably cannot hope for such a striking end. That death pierced me like lightning, like a needle, like a sword. That's why I will try to come as close to that as possible. I don't have any idea right now but I still have a few days to think about it. And I've already decided on the method. I don't think I even need to say this, but I think my end should be a long fall from a place overlooking the earth.

／Overlooking View／

The sun has set and we leave Touko-san's abandoned building. Shiki's apartment is in the area but my place is twenty minutes away from here by train. Tiredness shows in Shiki, who is walking a bit shakily, but nonetheless stays by my side.

"Do you think suicide is right, Mikiya?'

Shiki suddenly asks me that out of the blue. That downcast expression looks a bit touching.

"Hmm, I don't know. Let's say I get this virus that will kill everybody in Tokyo just by me staying alive. If everyone would be saved if I die, then I'd probably kill myself."

"What is that? That's so unlikely that it's not even a what-if story."

"Let me finish, I think I'd do that because I'm weak.

“I'm going to kill myself because I don't have the courage to keep on living and turn all of Tokyo into my enemy. That's easier, right? Courage for an instant and courage that needs to continue throughout your life. You know which one is harder.

“It's an extreme argument, but I think death is running away, no matter what kind of determination is behind it. But there are times when the concerned person wants to run away. I can't deny it or refute it, because I'm a weak person as well."

Hmm, but this seems like I'm saying it's all right for someone to do so because I'd do so too. Self-sacrifice in that case is probably the right thing to do, and that action would be called heroic. But that's wrong. It's foolish to choose death no matter how noble or right it is. No matter how wrong or low it is, we have to keep on living to make right our wrongs.

We have to live on and accept the end of the things we've caused. That is something that takes a lot of courage. I don't think I could do that myself, and it sounds too cocky, so I decide not to say it.

"...Well, anyways... I think it's just different for everyone."

I end rather vaguely and Shiki looks at me doubtfully.

"But you're different."

Shiki says so as if seeing inside my mind. Whilst initially cold-sounding, the words feel warm somehow. It's a bit embarrassing, so I walk on for a while in silence. The clamor of the main street is getting closer. Sounds, bright lights, engine sounds. Flooding waves of

people and the many sounds they make. If we pass the department stores, we'll be able to see the station right ahead.

Then, Shiki stops.

"Mikiya, come over to my place tonight."

"Huh? Why, all of a sudden?"

Shiki grabs me, saying that it doesn't matter.

It is indeed easier to stay at Shiki's place since it's nearby, but I don't feel like doing so, on moral grounds.

"It's fine. You don't have anything in your room either. It's boring even if I do go. Or are you telling me there's something I have to do there?"

I know there's no such thing. I said so knowing that, so there shouldn't be anything for Shiki to say back... or at least I think so. But Shiki looks at me as if I'm the cause of the problem.

"Strawberry."

"Huh?"

"Two strawberry Häagen-Dazs. They're still there from when you bought them. Finish those things off, man."

"...I guess I did buy those."

Yes I did. They were something I bought because of how hot it is while walking to Shiki's place. Then again, it's almost September after all, so I wonder why I bothered...

Well, I don't care about small things. I guess my only choice is to obey Shiki. But just obeying is a bit irritating, so I decide to strike back a little.

Shiki has a vulnerable point where, when I say this, Shiki gets mad but can't say anything back.

Even though it is a wish from the bottom of my heart, Shiki still has yet to take my advice.

"All right, I'll spend the night. But Shiki..."

Shiki looks at me as I advise with a straight face.

"You shouldn't talk like that. You're a girl, you know."

Shiki looks away, angrily.

Overlooking View (thanatos)/ Fin

Epilogue

That day, I chose to take the main street home. It was just a whim, and a very rare thing for me to do.

Walking woodenly along the building street that I was tired of seeing day in and day out, someone came crashing down. It was a squishing sound that you should never hear. The person lying on the pavement, broken, had obviously died from falling off a building. A crimson color slowly seeped onto the concrete. The only features that remained were the dark black hair and the pale, thin, fragile looking limbs.

And that featureless, crushed face.

The whole scene was surrounded by the old summer, and it reminded me of a pressed flower, flattened between the covers of a heavy tome.

I knew who it was. *Hypnos* returned after all by turning into *Thanatos*. I ignore the rapidly-growing swarm of bystanders and continue walking. Azaka catches up to me.

"Touko-san. She committed suicide by jumping off that building."

"Yeah, I guess so," I answer vaguely.

To be honest, I had no interest. No matter what the will of the person is, a suicide will be treated as a suicide. Her last will can be summed up with one word, not "flight" or "floating", but by the word "fall". What's there is only nothingness, and there's no way anyone can have an interest in that.

"I heard there was a lot of that last year, but is it still occurring a lot? I don't get what goes on in these peoples' minds. Do you know, Touko-san?"

"Yeah,"

I again answer vaguely while gazing up at the sky, as if looking at an image not there.

"There's no reason for suicide. It's just that she wasn't able to fly today."

2
Murder
Speculation (Part 01)
.....and nothing heart.

----1995, April.

I met her.

/Murder Speculation (Part 1)

/1

I decide to take a walk tonight again; it's pretty cool for the end of the summer and it feels like autumn is coming.

"Ojou-sama, please come home early tonight."

Akitaka, my servant, says while I am putting on my shoes at the entrance. How uninteresting. Ignoring his monotonous voice, I head out of the entrance.

Trudging past the garden, I continue through the gate. Once I exit the mansion, there are no streetlights; only darkness surrounds me. A deep darkness without any sound. The date is about to change from August 31 to September 1. The bamboo around the mansion rustles in the light wind, as if to frighten me. A walk in this kind of silence is the only thing I, Shiki, like to do.

As the night gets deeper, so does the darkness. I think I walk through the empty town because I want to be alone. Or is it because I want to think I'm alone? ...Either way, it's a stupid question. It's impossible for me to be alone in this world.

...Walking away from the main street, I enter a small alley.

I will be turning sixteen this year. In school terms, I am a first year in an ordinary private high school. But, no matter where I go for school, I will have to remain at the mansion in the future, thus my education seems almost meaningless. I had decided upon that school simply because it was nearby: a short commute was clearly the most efficient option.

Perhaps that turned out to be a mistake.

...The alley is darker than the main street. Only one streetlight flickers nervously.

Someone's face suddenly pops into my mind and I clench my teeth. I feel restless lately, even during one of these walks. It's because, out of nowhere, I remember *that guy* from time to time.

...Even in high school, my environment didn't change. No matter what grade they were in, people did not come near me. I don't exactly know why - maybe because I tend to wear my heart on a sleeve. I don't like people. I have not been able to like them since I was a child. I

even dislike myself because, unfortunately, I am a person too. That's why I cannot be nice to people when they talk to me... It's not that I despised them, but that's what the people around me thought. The word spread across campus quickly and within a month, nobody tried to communicate with me. I like a quiet environment too, so I had ended up in an ideal situation.

But the ideal was not to last. There was one student in my class that treated me, Ryougi Shiki, as a friend. That guy with a last name like a French poet was a nuisance to me. A real nuisance indeed.

...I saw a person under a streetlight far away.

---What a strange thing for me, I remembered that guy's smile.

...That person's behavior was suspicious.

---Thinking back on it later, why did I...

...I followed the person for some reason.

---Why did I feel such a surge of violent excitement?

◇

Deep in the back alley, it is another world. The dead end serves more as an enclosed room than a road - this narrow backstreet, engulfed by the walls of buildings, must be an area devoid of sunlight even during the daytime. I half expect to see a homeless guy, living in here in the town's blind spot, but it is not so. Fresh paint coats the surrounding walls, and this small alley is lined with something wet. The rancid smell of trash usually present in here is masked by an ever more overwhelming stench.

The sea of blood roils around me. What appeared to be red paint is in fact human blood; flowing and filling up the alley. The smell is from this red liquid. In the middle of it all is a man's corpse. I can't see his expression. It seems his arms and legs have been cut off and he looks more like a sprinkler spitting up a shower of blood.

This place is not normal. Even the blackness of the night is stained with the redness of blood.

---------Amidst it all, Shiki is smiling. The sleeves of her light blue kimono are tainted red. Kneeling down and touching the blood flowing on the ground, Shiki streaks it across her lips. The blood drips down her lips and her body trembles in ecstasy. This is the first lipstick that Shiki has ever worn.

/ 2

Summer vacation has ended and the new term has started.

Nothing has really changed in my school life. I guess the only thing that changed is how the students are dressed, as they start to wear thicker clothing as Autumn approaches. As for me, I have never worn anything other than a kimono. Akitaka would bring me cute clothes that a sixteen year old girl might wear, but I never thought about actually wearing them.

Fortunately, this school doesn't have uniforms, so I can stay in my kimono. I actually wanted a long-sleeved kimono, but with one of those I'd have to waste entire PE classes just changing in and out of them. In the end, I made do with a Yukata-like single-piece kimono. I wondered what I should do about the cold during winter time, but I found a solution to that problem yesterday.

...It happened during the breaks in between classes. I was questioned when I was in my seat.

"Aren't you cold, Shiki?"

"I'm not cold right now, but I guess it should start to feel cold soon."

The person in front of me frowns, as if he's figured out I'm planning to be in my kimono during the winter too.

"You're gonna be wearing that thing even during winter?"

"Probably, but I'll be fine because I'll be wearing something over it,"

I said abruptly, trying to bring a halt to the conversation. He walks away, seemingly surprised at the thought of something being worn over a kimono, and I too was caught rather off-guard by this solution that I had spontaneously developed. In the end, I went out to buy a coat. I bought a leather blouse as it seemed to be the warmest. I'll wear it in the wintertime, but it will stay in my closet until then.

◇

I end up eating lunch together with this guy, being invited and all. We're on the rooftop of the main school building, and many other groups of students surround me - A man and

woman in a couple; a group just like ours - as I observe them, he talks to me. I make as if to ignore him, but a single word catches my attention.

"...Huh?"

"I said "Murder". It happened on the last day of the summer vacation, in the western part of the shopping district. It's not on the news yet though."

"Murder... that's harsh..."

"Yeah, and the method was sick too. The killer cut off this guy's arms and legs and just left him there. I heard the whole place was such a sea of blood that they had to board off the alley, and that the killer is still on the loose."

"Only the arms and legs? Can a human die from just that?"

"Of course, from loss of blood. In this case, though, I would assume that death from shock occurred first."

He continues to eat while he talks. In contrast to his calm-looking face, he likes to talk about this kind of stuff. I guess one of his relatives is in the police force or something... I bet he isn't in that high of a rank though, since he's leaking confidential matters.

"Oh, sorry Shiki. I guess it doesn't concern you."

"It's not that it concerns me. But Kokuto-kun..."

I complain to the guy questioning me as I close my eyes.

"That's not something we should discuss during meals."

"You're right," nods Kokuto.

Geez... Now I don't have any appetite for this tomato sandwich I just bought.

◇

The first summer in high school ended by hearing a strange rumor like that one. The season slowly moves into autumn. For Ryougi Shiki, the life that seems just a bit different than what it used to be is about to head into the cold winter.

◇

It has been raining since this morning. Accompanied by the sound of the falling rain, I am walking in the hallway. There aren't many students in the school building now that classes are over. Since the "Killer" incident that Kokutou was talking about has been publicized, the school has banned all club activities. According to Akitaka in the car this morning, it's the fourth case this month. The authorities have no idea of the identity or motives of the killer. None of the victims are connected, except for the fact that they were all out late at night. I guess it wouldn't be that big of a deal if it had happened somewhere far away, but it's a different story when it happens in the very town you live in. All the students go home

before dark and everyone, including the boys, goes home together in groups. Since the cops start patrolling at around nine, I haven't been able to take any night walks to my satisfaction.

"Four victims..."

I murmur.

All the four scenes, I have...

"Ryougi-san."

Someone suddenly calls my name. Turning around, I see a guy I have never seen before. He's wearing blue jeans and a white shirt, very plain. He has a calm face too... He must be an upperclassman.

"Yes? What is it?"

"You don't have to glare at me like that. Are you looking for Kokuto-kun?"

He asks, with an artificially amiable smile accompanying his ridiculous statement.

"I'm about to go home. Kokuto-kun has nothing to do with this."

"Really? You're wrong. You don't understand, that's why you're irritated. You shouldn't take it out on others too much because of that. It's easy to blame things on someone... It grows to be a habit. Hahaha, isn't four times a bit too much though?"

"------Huh?"

Confused, I take a step back.

His false smile persists. A smile just like my own - how satisfied he looks. And yet...

"I just came here to talk to you. Now that I've done that, I need to go. Bye."

The man walks away. I don't watch him depart, but I hear the sound of his footsteps fading away into the rain. I head to the entrance. Changing shoes and going outside, I am met only by the rain: Akitaka, who is supposed to pick me up, is not here yet. He usually drives me home on rainy days, but I guess he's late today. It's too troublesome to change my shoes again, so I decide to wait by the stairs to the entrance.

The faint rain is clouding the school grounds. My breath mists white in the December cold... I don't know how long it had been before I noticed, but Kokutou is beside me.

"I have an umbrella."

"I'm fine, I have a ride home. You can go home."

"I'll get going in a bit. I want to stay here until then... Can I?"

I don't answer. He nods and leans against the wall. He's not the type who cares about his clothes getting dirty. I am not in the mood to talk with Kokuto. I'm determined to ignore anything he says, so it would make no difference whether he's here or not.

In the rain, I just wait. It's strangely quiet... only the raindrops fill my ears. Kokutou does not talk. Leaning on the wall, he has his eyes closed. I thought he was asleep, but it seems he's singing in a soft voice. I guess it's a popular song. Later, when I asked Akitaka, I found out it was called "Singing in the Rain".

Kokutou doesn't talk. There's less than one meter between us. Being this close together without a conversation makes me a bit restless. It was surprisingly painful...

How strange, why is this silence so heart wrenching?

I suddenly begin to feel scared... As if, if we stay like this, *he* will appear.

"...Kokuto-kun!"

"Yes!?"

He jolts up from the wall.

"What? Is something wrong?"

I can see myself in his eyes looking back at me. It's probably at this moment that I actually *look* at this person called Kokutou Mikiya for the first time, and not as a passing observation. He has soft facial features which look somewhat childish. He has big, deep black eyes. In a manner befitting his character, he has natural hair... not dyed or gelled. He wears black glasses that even kids would not wear nowadays. His plain clothing is black from top to bottom. I guess that's his style. I just wonder... Why is this person always meddling with me?

"Until now..."

Looking down, I try not to meet his eyes.

"Where were you?"

"I was in the student council room before I came here. Since our Senpai is withdrawing from school, we kind of had this small going-away party. He's called Shirazumi Rio, but it sure took me by surprise. He requested to withdraw from school, 'cause he said he found something he wanted to do, and he was a quiet person and all."

Shirazumi Rio... I don't think I've heard that name. But I do know how Kokutou would know a lot of people that would get him into parties like that. He's not only seen as a friend of classmates, but he is also somewhat popular among older girls.

"I invited you too. I told you yesterday but you never showed up at the student council room. I even went to the classroom to look, but you weren't there."

Certainly, he told me something like that yesterday. But I would have only spoiled the party had I gone... and I thought he was just being polite when he asked.

"I'm surprised. You were serious with that invitation?"

"Of course. What were you thinking, Shiki?"

Kokutou gets mad. Not because his promise was broken, but probably because I thought that way. I can only dislike his anger because it's something I have never experienced before.

I grow quiet from that moment on. On a day like today, I have never wanted Akitaka to show up so much. A bit later, the car drives up to me, and I bid goodbye to Kokuto.

◇

The rain finally stops during the night. Shiki puts on the red leather blouse on and goes outside. A dark cloudy sky looms overhead, with only occasional glimpses of moonlight breaking through the cover. The police are busily patrolling the city. It would be a bit troublesome to run into them, so I decide to go to the riverside.

The wet ground reflects the light from the street lamps, glowing like the remains of a slug. I hear a train pass in the distance. The echoing sound tells me that the viaduct is near, built to let trains past, but not pedestrians.

...I find someone there.

Slowly, Shiki heads to the viaduct.

The train passes by once again. It's probably the last one for today. The sound now is much louder than before and echoes in the surrounding. She covers her ears as if to protect herself from the deepness of the sound. As the train races away, it grows strangely quiet under the viaduct. Without any street lamps and no way for the moonlight to get in, it is pitch black.

That might be why even the red liquid spilled around this riverside looks black. This is the fifth murder scene. The corpse has been arranged to resemble a flower. With the face at the center, the arms and legs are splayed around it like petals... Severed limbs, neck bent upwards at an inhuman angle. It's easy to see that the intention was to create something like a flower...But it's a shame, it still looks more like a manji.

Amid the grass, an artificial flower is cast away. Because of the spilling blood, the flower is red in color.

... Getting used to this...

That's what she thought to herself. Swallowing dryly, she notices she is extremely thirsty. Is it because of the tension or the excitement? The burning in her throat is incredibly hot. This place is filled with death and Shiki's lips curl into a smile. Barely suppressing her ecstasy, she continues to stare at the corpse.

...Feeling that just at this instant, she is alive.

/3

It is a custom for the successor to the Ryougi family to have a match with the master using a real sword at the beginning of each month. The head of the Ryougi household many generations ago got tired of inviting many masters from abroad, so he made a dojo in his own house and made many new schools. This has been passed on until today and unfortunately, even a girl like me is required to wield a sword.

After finishing the match against my father, who surpassed me in both skill and strength, I head to my room. The distance between the dojo and the main house building is as far as, for example, a gym would be from a school building. I walk along the wooden floor, which does not creak even once. On the way, Akitaka is waiting for me. Akitaka, who is my servant, should be at least ten years older than me. He is probably waiting to help me change out of my sweaty clothes.

"Good job! Did your father say anything?"

"Same as always. Get lost, Akitaka. I can change by myself. You too, you're not like my personal servant. It's better for you to go to my older brother. In the end, it's the man that's succeeding."

Akitaka smiles at my harsh words.

"No, there can be no other successor than you. Your brother did not inherit your nature."

"What's so good about this nature?"

I leave Akitaka and head back to the building. Locking myself up in my room, I take off my gi. I stare at the mirror... A woman's body is reflected back at me. If I were to put on some make-up, and pull a scary face, I might be able to look like a guy; but there's nothing that can be done about the body. My body, that grows every day, that is sending SHIKI into despair.

"Maybe I should have been born a guy."

I talk aloud to no one. No, there is someone I can talk to. Inside me, another personality called SHIKI. All children of the Ryougi family are prepared two different names with the same pronunciation. The name of the yin, a name as a man. The name of the yang, a name as a woman. Since I was born female, I was named Shiki, which means "equation" or "form". If I would have been born male, I would have been named SHIKI, which means "to weave".

Why do we do this? It's because the Ryougi family produces children with a high probability of having split personalities.

Just like me.

Father said the Ryougi family has the heredity of a transcendent race. He also mentioned that it is a curse. It is indeed a curse. To me, this is not transcendent, but just abnormal. Fortunately, no successor has been of this nature for several generations. The reason is simple... they all ended up in the mental hospital before maturity. It's very dangerous to have two personalities in one body. The boundary between realities becomes vague and there have been many cases of suicide. But despite it all, I grew up without showing any sign of insanity. It's because me and SHIKI ignored each other.

The right to the ownership of the body is completely mine. SHIKI is only a substitute personality, one that I switched to for the match earlier, since his aggressive personality fits the situation more suitably. Come to think of it, SHIKI and I exist at the same time. This is different from what people know as a "split personality". I am Shiki, but at the same time, I am also SHIKI. It's just that I have the ownership of the body.

Father was happy that he could produce the rightful successor of the Ryougi family in his generation. That's why I'm treated as the successor, disregarding my male brother. That's fine, I take what's given to me. I probably thought I would lead this somewhat distorted normal life forever. I knew I could only lead such a life...

...Yes, even if SHIKI is a killing monster, I am not able to make him disappear. Since I have "SHIKI" in me, I am Shiki just like him.

Murder Speculation (Part 1)／

1

"Mikiya, is it true that you're going out with Ryougi?"

I almost spew out my coffee milk to Gakuto's words. Spluttering, I look around: Fortunately, the classroom at lunchtime is loud and no one seems to have heard Gakuto's nonsense.

"What do you mean by that, Gakuto?"

Gakuto looks rather amazed when I question him.

"What are you saying? It's a fact known to everyone that Kokutou of class 1-C has a crush on Ryougi. The only ones who don't know are you two."

I frown at those words.

It's been seven months since I first met Shiki. It's already November, right near winter.

...Certainly it's not weird for anyone to start going out after that much time.

"Gakuto, that's just a misunderstanding. We're just friends, and nothing more."

"Really?"

The hopeful judo club member frowns. In contrast to his name, which means "educated person", this guy, who has been my friend since elementary school, is the athletic type. Thanks to our strong relationship, he must have figured out I wasn't lying.

"But you call her by her first name. There's no way that Ryougi would allow a simple classmate to address her like that."

"Hey now. Shiki doesn't like that. She glared at me when I called her Ryougi-san before. People *say* you can kill someone by looking at them, but Shiki definitely has that potential. Anyways, she says she hates people calling her by her last name, so she says it's fine if I just call her "you". But since I didn't like that, I compromised with "Shiki-san". She didn't like that either, so it ended up with just Shiki. That is the boring truth."

Telling Gakuto about what happened in April, he agrees that it was indeed a boring development.

"I see. That sure is an unromantic story."

Gakuto says this disappointedly... What kind of an answer was he hoping for?

"So that thing last week at the school entrance was nothing either? Damn, it was a waste of time coming here. I should have just eaten lunch in my classroom."

"...Hold on. How do you know about that?"

"I told you, you guys are famous. Everyone at the school already knows you and Ryougi were getting shelter from the rain together by the entrance last Saturday. Since it's Ryougi, even small things like that catch everyone's attention."

I sigh and look up. All I can hope for now is that Shiki will never hear about this.

"This is a school to get you ready for college right? I'm starting to wonder if everyone's really studying..."

"According to the teachers, employment rate is good for students who graduate from here."

...I have to question how this school is run.

"But man, why Ryougi? It just doesn't fit you."

I remember being told something like that by my Senpais.

They told me a quiet, gentle girl would suit me. I guess Gakuto thinks along the same lines too.

...I get a bit angry.

"Shiki isn't such a scary girl."

I let my tongue slip...

Gakuto grins... He looks like he knows I didn't mean to say that out loud.

"What do you mean she's just your friend? She's definitely a hard girl. The fact that you don't see that is proof that you're head-over-heels about her."

He must mean hard-headed when he says hard. I know he's right, but I don't want to just give in and nod.

"I already know that."

"Then what's so good about her? Her looks?"

Gakuto is holding nothing back.

Indeed Shiki is beautiful. But with that aside, I am attracted to Shiki. She always seems like she's about to be hurt. In reality, she's firm enough not to get hurt, but she is also more fragile than she looks. That's probably why I can't ignore her. I don't want to see her get hurt.

"It's just something that you don't notice. Even Shiki has her cute points... Let's see, if I think of her as an animal, she's cute enough to be a rabbit."

Suddenly, I regret saying that.

"Don't be stupid. She's definitely in the cat family, and probably the wild ones too. A rabbit is too far off, way too far. Ryougi is more like the type that would die out of loneliness, isn't she?"

Gakuto laughs his ass off.

But I think she's like a rabbit in that she doesn't become attached to people, and in the way she observes others from a distance. Huh... if that's just me, then fine.

"All right. I won't talk to you about girls anymore."

Gakuto quits laughing once I tell him that.

"You might be right. A rabbit suits her well."

"Gakuto, a frank agreement is rather offensive."

"I mean it. I remembered that rabbits were dangerous too. In this world, there are rabbits that chop off your head if you're unlucky."

I stall at the serious voice in which he delivers this statement.

"That's a pretty amazing rabbit."

Gakuto nods.

"Of course, 'cause I'm talking about the world of gaming."

2

I saw an unbelievable thing on the day the exam for the second quarter ended.

There was a letter in my desk. No, that itself wasn't too weird. The problem was the sender and its content. To put it simply, it was from Shiki, asking me out on a date.

It sounded like a threat telling me to take her out somewhere tomorrow. Bewildered, I headed home and waited apprehensively for the next day to come, feeling like a samurai ordered to kill himself the following sunrise.

◇

"Yo, Kokuto."

Shiki greets me as she arrives. She came to our meeting-place, the dog statue in front of the station, with a red leather jacket over her kimono. More than her outfit, I was confused by how she spoke.

"Did ya wait? Sorry man. It took me a while to shake off Akitaka."

She says this as if it's perfectly natural for her.

She sounds like a guy, not like the Shiki I know. Not being able to answer, I check her figure again. There's nothing different in her looks. She has a graceful, somewhat diminutive body, but her confident stance and composure lend her a certain measure of strength. This

unstable contradiction creates an almost marionette-like atmosphere around here. She is a puppet. Made well, but just on the outside.

"What? You angry just 'cause I'm an hour late? You're pretty intolerant, man."

Shiki engages me with her dark eyes. Her beautiful short black hair frames that small face, and big, beautiful eyes. Nevertheless, whilst those deep eyes reflect the outline of Kokutou Mikiya on the surface, it seems that they are focused on something much further away. Perhaps in the distance...

Come to think of it, I was attracted to these eyes since that snowy day when we first met.

"Um... You're Shiki, right?"

"Yeah," Shiki laughs. A strange smile that's more like a grin.

"What else do I look like? We're wasting time like this. Come on, take me somewhere. I'll let you decide, Kokuto."

Saying that, Shiki seizes my arms forcefully and starts to walk.

...She'd said she'd let me decide, but in my confusion I didn't even notice that she was leading the way...

We walked a lot.

Shiki didn't do much shopping, but she would go into various boutiques to look around, heading into another whenever she got bored. My requests to take a rest at the cafe or a movie theater were denied, but she was in the right. It would have been boring to go to such places with the way Shiki was acting at the moment.

Shiki talked a lot. If I'm not mistaken, she seemed excited somehow. How should I say this... a mental high?

Most of the stores she went to were fashion-oriented, but I was relieved that they were all for women's clothing. Eventually, Shiki must have become tired from looking through four department stores in four hours, as she told me that she wanted to get something to eat.

We wander around and end up in a fast food joint. Shiki takes off her jacket once she takes a seat. Her out-of-place kimono garb draws glances from all around, but this fact does not seem to faze her. Steeling my nerves, I ask her about what I've been wondering all this time.

"Shiki, you actually talk like that all the time?"

"In my case. But there's no meaning in how someone talks. Even you can change that."

Shiki eats at her hamburger disinterestedly.

"Well, this kind of thing never happened before. Today's the first day that I came outside. I didn't say anything until now 'cause I had the same opinion as Shiki."

...I don't get it at all.

"Let's see... It's a split personality, to put it simply. I'm *SHIKI* and the normal one is *Shiki*. SHIKI is from the word, "woven cloth." But Shiki and I are not different people. The only difference between us is our priorities of things. The hierarchy of our interests is different."

Saying that, she writes on her napkin with her wet hands. Her white finger traces the words "Shiki" and "SHIKI".

"I wanted to talk with you, Kokuto, that's all. Since it's not something Shiki wanted to do, I'm doing it in her place. Do ya understand?"

"Well, kind of."

I answer uneasily, but I actually have felt what SHIKI is talking about. I think something similar to that happened to me before. Before I entered high school, I met Shiki, but she said she didn't remember it. At that time I thought she said that because she hated me, but after hearing this, it makes sense.

No, more than that. After spending all day with her I can tell she is the same Shiki. As Shiki, no, as SHIKI says, she only talks differently, but her actions are the same. They are so similar I'm starting to feel there's nothing different about her now.

"But why did you tell me about that?"

"I thought I wouldn't be able to hide it from ya much longer."

Shiki takes another drink. She puts the straw to her mouth briefly, and quickly lets go... Shiki doesn't like cold things.

"To be honest, I'm like Shiki's subversive impulse. This was something that she really wanted to do. But up to now, there was no one I wanted to do it with, because Ryougi Shiki was uninterested in everyone."

SHIKI says so like she's not interested. I could not move, being entranced by those deep black eyes.

"Yeah, but you rest assured, I'm still Shiki. I'm just saying what Shiki thinks. Like I told ya, we just talk differently... Well, we're beginning to get out of line, so don't take me too seriously."

"Out of line?... You mean, you and Shiki get into fights?"

"Hey, how can you get in a fight with yourself? No matter what I do, it has to be something we both wanted, so we both have no complaints. No matter how much I fight, Shiki has control over this body. I'm seeing you like this because Shiki thought it was all right too. Anyway, she'll probably regret having talked this way. It's not something Shiki would do, right?"

I agree.

SHIKI laughs.

"I like those kind of things about you. But Shiki doesn't. That's what I mean by being out of line."

...What does that mean? Does Shiki not like the fact that I don't think too much? Or does Shiki not like the fact that she likes that part of me? I don't know why, but I somehow thought it had to be the latter.

"Well, that's enough explanation for today."

Standing up suddenly, SHIKI puts on the leather jacket.

"Bye~. I like you, so I'll see you again pretty soon."

Putting the money for the hamburger on the table, SHIKI leaves quickly.

◇

I part with SHIKI and return to my neighborhood, the sun is setting already. Because of all the recent murder incidents not many people are out, even though the sun's only setting.

When I get home, my cousin, Daisuke Nii-san is there. I feel exhausted from all that talk with SHIKI, so I go to the kotatsu and put my legs in it. Daisuke Nii-san also has his legs in there so we end up fighting for the small space inside without a word. In the end, I couldn't lay down, so I just had to get up again.

"Aren't you busy, Daisuke-san?"

I ask him while taking a mandarin orange off the table. Daisuke Nii-san answers:

"Yeah. It's five people in three months, of course we're busy. I'm so busy I can't even go home to sleep. I have to get going again in about an hour."

Daisuke Nii-san is a police officer. It's an unfitting job for such a lazy person.

"How's the investigation going?"

"It's all right. There weren't any clues until now but the killer finally left us something. Well, it does seem intentional though."

Saying that, Daisuke Nii-san lifts up his face. His serious face is right in front of mine.

"What I'm telling you is confidential. I'm going to tell you because this is something that's important to you. I told you about the first victim, right?"

Daisuke Nii-san begins to describe the second and the third murder scene... I listen closely while hoping not all policemen in this world let out confidential matters so easily.

The second victim had their body bisected vertically. From their head down to their groin. The weapon used is unknown. One of the cut halves was stuck to the wall.

The third victim had their arms and legs amputated, with the severed arms sewn onto the legs.

The fourth victim had their body cut into pieces and had some word-like symbol stamped on it.

The fifth victim was made to resemble a manji using its arms and legs.

"It's easy to understand that the killer is abnormal."

I say this while trying to hold back the rapidly rising wave of nausea. Daisuke Nii-san agrees.

"I think it's clearly intentional when it's so easy to understand, but what do you think?"

"...Let's see. I don't think it matters that every one of them is killed by being cut apart. I can't say anything else, but..."

"But?"

"I just think the killer is getting used to this. The next one might not be outside."

"You're right." Daisuke Nii-san covers his face with his hands.

"There's no motive and there's no pattern. It's only happening outside right now but, this is a kind of a guy that would even come indoors. If this killer can't find anyone out at night, there's more motive for them to go into someone's house. I just wish the higher ranking guys would take that into consideration and be prepared for it."

"Well..." Daisuke Nii-san changes the subject.

"We found this by the fifth victim."

Daisuke Nii-san places our school badge on the table. It's considered unimportant, seeing as we don't have uniforms or anything, but we are in fact required to wear this somewhere on our person when going to school.

"I don't know if the killer didn't notice this because the scene of the crime was a grassy field or if the killer intentionally put this there. But either way, there has to be a meaning behind this. I might go over to your place sometime soon."

Frowning, he delivers this ominous statement.

3

The winter vacation ended in a flash. The only thing that happened was I went to the shrine on new year with Shiki. But I think I led a normal life other than that.

When the third term started, Shiki isolated herself even more. She radiated an aura of rejection that even I could feel.

After making sure everyone else has left and going to the classroom, I always find SHIKI there. She doesn't do anything, she just stares out of the window. I haven't been invited or called to come here. But I just can't leave this fragile girl alone, so I keep her company meaninglessly.

The sun sets early in the wintertime and the classroom is tinted red. In this red and black, SHIKI is leaning against the window.

"Did I tell you that I hate people?"

Today, SHIKI starts to talk mindlessly.

"That's the first time I heard that... do you mean that?"

"Yeah, Shiki hates people. She's been like that since she was small. ... You see, when you're a child, you don't know anything. You think the whole world will love you unconditionally. Since you like them, they must like you... That feels like common sense."

"You're right. You never doubt anything when you're small. You unconditionally love them and you think it's only natural for them to love you back. The only things I was scared of were ghosts. Though, I'm scared of people now."

SHIKI nods in agreement.

"But that's a very important thing. You need to be pure, Kokuto. Since you only worry about yourself when you're small, you won't notice the evil minds of other people. Even if it's just a misunderstanding, the feeling of love you receive makes you able to be kind to others, hence people can only express the emotions they're familiar with."

The sunset casts a red hue across her face. At this moment, I cannot tell if she is SHIKI or Shiki, yet it does not make any difference either way, this is just *Shiki's* monologue.

"But I'm different. I have known someone else since I was born. Since Shiki has SHIKI inside of her, she knew of others. She found out that there're other people who think differently and that they do not love you unconditionally. Since she found out as a child how ugly other people are, she could not love them. In time, she grew to pay them no attention. The only emotion Shiki knows is rejection."

... That's why she hates people. SHIKI says so with her eyes... I feel like crying for no reason.

"But wasn't she lonely like that?"

"Why? Shiki has me. It's certainly lonely by yourself but Shiki isn't alone. She was isolated, but she wasn't alone."

SHIKI says so with a resolute face. There's no deceit in that expression, and it seems she really is satisfied with that.

But really...?

Yet really...?

"But Shiki is acting weird recently. She has an abnormality in her called "me", but she wants to deny me. Denying is my domain, and Shiki is supposed to be only able to affirm."

SHIKI laughs asking why that might be. It's a brutal looking smile.

"Kokuto, have you ever wanted to kill someone?"

At that instant, the sun paints her face in vermilion and makes my heart jump.

"Not so far. The most I've ever wanted was to punch someone."

"I see. But I only have that feeling."

Her voice echoes through the classroom.

"....

Huh?"

"I told you. Humans can only show emotions that they have experienced. I take on the forbidden taboos inside Shiki. What's low on Shiki's priorities is high on mine. I am content with that and I know that's why I exist. I am the personality that takes on Shiki's suppressed intentions. That's why I've always killed my will. I have been killing the dark side called SHIKI. I have killed myself over and over. See? The only thing I've experienced is killing things."

Then, she walks away from the window. Why... do I suddenly find the person silently walking toward me so terrifying?

"So Kokuto, the definition of *murder* for Shiki is..."

A voice murmuring by my ear...

"... Is to eliminate, in self defense, anything that tries to open her up."

Smiling, SHIKI leaves the classroom. It was an innocent smile that one would give after playing a trick on you...

◇

During lunch break the next day...

When I asked Shiki if she wanted to have lunch with me, she looked really surprised. At this time, she showed me her surprised expression for the first time since I have met her.

"What a strange thing to ask..."

Saying that, Shiki accepts my request. Shiki asks that we go to the rooftop. She is following silently behind me. Her silent stare is stabbing into my back. Maybe she's mad at me... no, she definitely is... Even I know what she meant by those words yesterday. It was her last warning to me not to be involved with her, and that she doesn't know what she might do if I don't comply.

But Shiki does not understand. That's something Shiki has always unconsciously told me, and I have already gotten used to it. When we get to the rooftop, no one is there. I guess being January and all, nobody else wanted to eat in this cold weather.

"It's cold, do you want to eat somewhere else?"

"No, I want to eat here. If you want to go somewhere else, please go ahead."

I tilt my head to Shiki's polite tone. We sit by the wall to avoid the wind. Shiki just sits there without opening her bread. In contrast, I have already finished my second sandwich.

"Why did you talk to me?"

Shiki's murmur is so sudden that I could not catch her words.

"Did you say something, Shiki?"

"I said, why are you so carefree?"

She says so with piercing eyes.

"That's harsh. I've been called excessively honest, but I've never been called carefree."

"I guess everyone was holding back."

Selfishly convinced, Shiki opens her egg sandwich. The stark crunch of the wrapper suited the frosty rooftop. Shiki sits there silently and nibbles on her sandwich. I have nothing to do as I'm already done. I think a meal needs to be accompanied by a conversation.

"Shiki, you must be a bit mad."

"...A bit?"

She glares at me. I scold myself for not thinking before I spoke.

"I don't understand, but I get irritated when you're around. Why you involve yourself with me, why you don't act differently after being told all that yesterday, these are all things I don't understand."

"I don't know the reason either. It's fun being with you, but if you ask me why it's fun, I can't answer. Well, if you talk about yesterday, I guess you can say I'm optimistic."

"Kokuto-kun, do you understand that I'm abnormal?"

I can only nod to those words. Her split personality is real and it is indeed not normal.

"Yeah, it's indeed not normal."

"Right. So then you should understand that I am not someone you could associate with normally."

"Abnormal or not, it doesn't matter when we're hanging out."

Shiki stops all movement. She stops time as if she's even forgotten how to breathe.

"But I cannot be like you."

Saying that, Shiki slides her fingers through her hair. Her kimono sways and I notice the bandage wrapped around her thin arm, near her right elbow. The fabric looks clean and new.

"Shiki, that wound..."

Before I get a chance to finish, Shiki stands up.

"If you don't understand with SHIKI's words, I'll tell you myself."

Shiki talks while gazing away into the distance.

"If we keep this up, I will probably end up killing you."

... How could I have replied to those words?

After that, Shiki returns to the classroom, leaving her trash behind. On my own again, I begin to pick up the litter.

"...Geez, this is just like Gakuto said."

I remember the conversation I had with Gakuto. Like he told me, I might be stupid. I could not hate Shiki even after she completely rejected me. Rather, my mind has been cleared. There can only be one reason why it's fun being with Shiki.

"I already went mad a long time ago."

...Yeah, why didn't I notice this earlier?

...I love Shiki so much that I can even laugh off her telling me she wants to kill me.

4

It's the first Sunday in February. I wake up and go to the dining room. Daisuke Nii-san is there, getting ready to leave.

"Oh, you were here?"

"Yo. I just came to sleep 'cause I missed the last train, but I've gotta go to work now. I envy you students, your promises of vacation are always kept."

He looks like he hasn't had enough sleep. I bet he's busy with all the new information on that serial killer.

"You were talking about coming to my school, but what happened to that?"

"It seems we'll have to go there again. To tell you the truth, there was a sixth victim three days ago. I guess this victim struggled hard and we found evidence of the killer's skin in her nails. Women have long nails so I guess she scratched the killer's arm pretty bad. Maybe it was a desperate move but the scratch has to be deep; she clawed out almost three centimeters of skin."

This development is a new one, it's not even on TV or in the newspapers yet. But I am shocked for a different reason... I think it's because in the past few days, Shiki has been using the ominous word "killing" quite a number of times. Why else would I imagine for an instant that Shiki would be this killer?

"A scratch... you mean the killer has a wound?"

"Of course. Do you think the victim would scratch her own arm? We've already figured out the skin is from around the elbow area, and the blood's been analyzed, so the killer is done for."

Daisuke Nii-san leaves. With power escaping my legs, I crumble onto the chair. Three days ago was the day I had that conversation with SHIKI in the setting sun. I think when I saw her the next day, the bandage was around her elbow...

Right around mid-day, I figure out it's no good just sitting here and thinking. Instead, I should just go to Shiki and ask her. If she tells me her wound is nothing related to it, this uneasiness will go away.

I decide to visit Shiki's house using the school's contact guide. Her house is on the outskirts of town, one station away from here. When I finally find her house, the sun is already setting. The mansion with bamboo trees surrounding it is oriental-styled. It's impossible to tell the size of this place from where I am - I wouldn't be able to tell exactly how big it is unless I got in a plane to have an overhead view. I walk through the bamboo woods along a path and reach a big gate: I'm slightly relieved that this ancient-looking place has an intercom. After pushing it and declaring my intentions, a man in a black suit appears. I find out that this man, in around his thirties, is Shiki's servant. This person called Akitaka talks politely, even to a stranger such as myself. Unfortunately, Shiki isn't home. He offers for me to stay and wait, but I refuse. To be honest, I don't have the guts to go into this place alone.

I decide to go home since the sun has already set. I get to the station after an hour's walk and happen to run into Senpai. At his invitation, we eat at a nearby restaurant and end up talking until ten. Unlike Senpai, I am a student so I have to start heading home soon: I say goodbye to Senpai and buy a train ticket at the station. It's almost eleven o'clock now. For a second I wonder if Shiki has arrived home already.

"What the hell am I doing?"

I question myself as I walk through the residential district, which appears absent of any sign of life this late at night. I can't understand why I'm heading toward Shiki's house in this unfamiliar town. Even though I know I won't be able to see her, I at least want to see the lights in her house. Trudging through the chilly winter air, I exit the residential district and end up facing a group of trees. I walk through the small road in the middle of it. Since there's no wind, the bamboo is silent. There are no streetlights, so the moon is my only guide.

I half-jokingly think what would happen if I got attacked here, and the thought begins to eat at me. The image grows stronger in my head even as my consciousness struggles to discard the thought. When I was a kid, I was scared of ghosts. The shadows in between the bamboo looked like ghosts and I would be frightened. But now, I'm scared of other people. I'm only scared of the fact that someone might be hiding in the bushes.

...Since when did the unknown ghosts turn into other humans?

The more I try to calm down, the more the feeling creeps into me. ...Really, this dreadful feeling does not go away. Oh yeah, I think Shiki was saying the same thing before. I think that was... While I try to recall, I see something ahead of me.

"....."

I stop dead in my tracks. It's not my will, because right now... my mind is totally empty.

A white figure stands a few meters ahead. The white kimono that looks bright is covered with red spots. The red spots on the kimono expand. It's because the thing in front of her is spilling red liquid everywhere. The one in the white kimono is Shiki and the *thing* is not a fountain, but a dead person.

"....."

I cannot say anything. But I always thought about this somewhere in my mind, this image of Shiki standing in front of a dead body. That's why I'm not surprised or making a commotion. My mind is just completely blank. The body must have recently died... the blood would not be flowing out with such a force unless its arteries were slashed while it was alive. There is a gaping wound in its neck and an angled cut transecting its torso. Shiki is silently staring at the dead body. The color of the spilled blood alone is enough to make one faint, yet its organs spill and bulge grotesquely out from the wound, transforming it into something inhuman. It appears as if some slimy, primitive being is trying to assume a human form, but the resemblance is so horrific that it's difficult to look at... A normal human being would not be able to stand the sight, but Shiki is staring at the dead body. Blood splatters her ghostly-white kimono.

The spots look like red butterflies.

The butterflies are flying toward Shiki's face.

The blood-covered face is twisted and deformed.

Is it because of fear or pleasure?

Is she Shiki... or SHIKI?

"....."

I try to say something and I collapse onto the ground. I vomit. I vomit out everything in my stomach, stomach acid, as if to try and rid myself of this memory... I vomit until I start to cry. But it's no good. It doesn't even make me feel better. The amount of blood is so vast and the smell so overwhelming that it seeps into my brain.

Eventually, Shiki notices me. Her head turns to look at me. The expressionless face shows a smile. It's so pure it makes me rather calm. The smile reminds me of a mother. That smile is so unfitting to this whole scene that...

It makes me shiver.

My consciousness begins to fade as she draws closer. I remember Shiki's words at the last moment.

..."Be careful Kokuto-kun. A bad premonition tends to attract bad reality."

... I guess I was stupid indeed. Because I tried not to think about this evil reality until the moment I saw it with my own eyes...

5

I end up missing school the following day. I was found by a policeman, standing absent-mindedly at the scene of the crime, and was taken in for questioning.

I heard I could not say anything for a few hours. It took me about four hours before my mind returned... I guess my brain doesn't have that good of a recovery system. Anyways, after I was questioned and released, it was too late to go to school.

The manner in which the man was killed would have made it impossible for the killer not to have blood on their clothes: fortunately, I did not; and being a relative of Daisuke Nii-san, I think my questioning went rather smoothly. Daisuke Nii-san offered me a ride home, which I accepted.

"So you didn't see anyone, Mikiya?"

"You're being too persistent. I said I didn't see anyone."

I glare at Daisuke Nii-san and sit deep in my seat.

"I see. Damn! It would have helped if you'd seen the killer... but I guess he wouldn't have let you go alive if you saw him. I can't let you die, so I guess it's a good thing for me you didn't see anyone."

"You're not a good policeman, Daisuke-san."

I hate myself for being able to respond to him in such a normal tone. My mind scornfully brands me a liar. I can't believe that I can lie with such a straight face, especially considering these are police matters we're talking about here. If I don't tell the truth, things will only get worse... But still, I do not say anything about Shiki being at the scene of the crime.

"Well, I'm glad you're not hurt. So, what's your impression of your first dead body?"

He asks me a cruel question.

"Terrible. I don't ever want to see it again."

"This one is special. It's not as bad as what is normally seen so relax."

What does he want me to be relaxed about?

"But, it's a small world we live in. I didn't know you knew the daughter of the Ryougi family."

The fact that might make him happy gets me more depressed... The murder that happened in front of Ryougi's house is treated as the same killer's work but the investigation stopped from there. Even the police left the territory of the Ryougis after their inspection. From what he says, it's because of the pressure from the Ryougis. It was recorded that this murder happened in between eleven and twelve at night on February third (Sunday), and the only witness was Kokutou Mikiya. But it's also recorded that I was there only after the crime had occurred and that I was in a state of shock after seeing the scene of the crime. Neither I nor the Ryougi family have said anything about Shiki.

"But didn't you investigate the people of the Ryougi?"

Daisuke-san shakes his head to my question.

"The daughter of that place goes to your high school, so I wanted to ask them about it, but they refused. They said they didn't care about what happened outside their house. The way I see it, they are innocent, they have nothing to do with the crime."

"Huh?"

I let it out without thinking. I trust Daisuke Nii-san even if it seems like I don't. It's commonly known in his workplace that this person keeps his hold on his job due to his superior skill; so that's why I thought he might suspect Shiki.

"Why do you think so?"

"Hmm, well... do you think such a beautiful girl would kill someone? You don't, right? I don't think so too. This is an obvious answer for a guy."

...Why did he ever decide to be a policeman? No, more than that, I sigh at how much more carefree he is than me.

"I see. You'll be single for the rest of your life."

"Hey now, I could put you in jail, you know."

I'd be released due to lack of any convicting evidence... But I agree with his opinion. Even though I don't have the hunch like he does, it is my opinion that Shiki is not the killer. Even if she admits it herself, I believe she is not the one. So now, there is something I must do.

The crime neared its solution.

From then on, until that day three years later, the killer would cease to appear. For me at that time, that incident seemed like it did not concern me.

It happened to be the first and the last incident which involved both Shiki and me.

Murder Speculation (Part 1)/Finish

／4

A murder occurred in front of my house. My memory of the night after I went to take a walk is vague. But if you connect the parts that I remember, what I must have done is obvious. SHIKI is the same way too, but I do not deal with blood too well. Just looking at it makes my mind go blank. The flowing blood of this victim was really beautiful. The stone road to my mansion, the space between the stones are like a maze and the red liquid navigating that labyrinth was filled with a beauty I had never encountered before.

But that caused the misfortune. When I regained my senses, someone was throwing up behind me. It was Kokutou Mikiya. I didn't know why he was there and, at that time, I didn't even wonder why he was there. After that, I think... I went back to the mansion, but it seems the crime was found out much later than that and nobody knew I was at the scene of the crime. Then, was what I saw just a dream? There's no way that my honest classmate would not say anything about the killer. But why did it have to be in front of my house?

"SHIKI, is it you?"

I ask aloud, but there's no answer. SHIKI and I are out of sync. That feeling grows stronger every day. Even if I let SHIKI use my body, the one who decides is me, but why is it that my memory is vague when I do so?

... Maybe I just don't realize it, but I might be insane like everyone else of the Ryougi bloodline. SHIKI would say: "If you think you're abnormal, then you're not." For an abnormal person, everyone else seems abnormal, so they would not question themselves. At least that's the way I was. Then that must mean I finally figured out the difference between me and the rest of the world after sixteen years. But who caused that?

"Please excuse me, Ojou-sama."

Akitaka says after knocking on the door.

"What is it?"

Akitaka opens the door with my permission. It's almost bedtime, so he does not enter the room.

"It seems there's someone checking out the mansion."

"I heard from father that he got all the policemen out."

Akitaka nods.

"All the police have been off the property since last night. I think it is someone else tonight."

"Do as you wish. It has nothing to do with me."

"It seems the one outside is your friend from your school."

After hearing that, I immediately get up from my bed. I go to the window facing the mansion's gate and look outside. In the bamboo woods, there is a figure that I wish would hide more cleverly. ... It pisses me off.

"I can get him to go home if you wish."

"You can let it be."

I quickly make my way to the bed and lay down. Akitaka leaves after wishing me goodnight. I cannot sleep even after turning off the lights and closing my eyes. There's nothing to do so I check outside the window again. Wearing a brown coat, Mikiya is shivering in the cold. It seems he's looking at the gate. He has a pot of coffee by his feet. What a great guy.

I have to reject the idea that seeing Mikiya at that place is only a dream. Since he was actually there, he's here right now to check on me. I don't know what his motives are, but I think he's probably out to check who the killer is... Anyway, I get mad and unconsciously bite at my nail.

◇

The day after such this incident, Mikiya was acting normally.

"Shiki, wanna eat lunch together?"

He would say that and go to the rooftop. I feel like I'm being trained using food as I always accept his offer of lunch. I would have decided to ignore him, but I was curious about what he thought of that night. I followed him up to the rooftop thinking he would question me about it, but Mikiya was the same as always.

"Isn't your house too big? I can brag about seeing a servant just by going to see you."

Mikiya has no right to use the word "servant".

"Akitaka is my father's secretary. And we call them caretakers, not servants, Kokuto-kun."

"I see, so you do have people like that at your place."

... That's the only time my house comes up in the conversation. With his personality, I don't think he realizes that we saw him checking out the mansion; but still, he is acting too strangely. He must have seen me covered in blood that night, so why can he still laugh like it never happened? I bring the topic up myself.

"Kokutoh-kun, on the night of February third..."

"Don't talk about that."

He avoids my question just like that.

"What is it, Kokuto?"

... I can't believe it, I'm talking like SHIKI without noticing. Mikiya is a bit startled at being addressed so, while I am obviously still Shiki.

"Tell me, why didn't you tell the police about me?"

"...Because I didn't see anything."

That's a lie. There's no way. At that time, SHIKI went towards him and...

"You just happened to be there, right? At least, that's what I saw, so I decided to believe in you."

That's a lie. Otherwise, why would he be checking on the mansion?

...SHIKI went towards him and...

"Well, to be honest, it's a bit difficult for me to think about it right now. If I can have confidence in myself, I should be able to hear you out; so let's not talk about that for now."

His expression makes me feel like running away.

...SHIKI definitely tried to kill Kokutou Mikiya...

I did not want such a thing. Mikiya said he would believe me. If I could also believe in myself, I wouldn't feel this unknown pain either...

◇

From that day on, I decide to ignore Mikiya completely. About two days into it, he stopped talking to me, but he doesn't stop coming to the mansion to check on me. Under the cold winter sky, he would stay in the bamboo woods until about three in the morning. As a result, I'm no longer able to take my nightly walks. It's been about two weeks since it started. I gaze outside the window, wondering if he really wants to figure out the identity of the killer that badly.

He is really persistent.

It's almost three in the morning, but he just keeps staring at the gate. There's no sign of desperation in his expression - in fact, he seems to be smiling as he leaves.

"....."

I get irritated. I finally understand. He isn't out to find the killer. For him, it's only natural to trust me, and that's why he doesn't suspect me. He's there knowing from the beginning that I would not go out during the night. He's only there to prove my innocence. That's why he smiles happily when the night ends without anything happening, believing that the true killer is really innocent.

"... What a happy guy."

I murmur to myself. Being with Mikiya calms me down. Being with Mikiya makes me think I'm like him. Being with Mikiya makes me think I could go over to *their* side. But definitely, that bright side of the world is a world I should never be in. A world I cannot exist in, a world without a place for me... He drags me in with his smile...

That's why I am irritated by Mikiya, making me think all that. I have inside me a killer called SHIKI. That boy that lets me know that I am abnormal...

"I am fine by myself. You're getting in my way, Kokuto."

Shiki does not want to go crazy.

SHIKI does not want to be broken.

Everything would have been fine if I had never had the dream of living normally.

◇

March comes and the cold starts to ebb away. I look outside from my classroom. The overlooking view from here makes a person like me feel safe. A view that I cannot reach precludes me from having any semblance of *hope*. Mikiya comes as usual into the red-washed classroom. SHIKI likes to talk like this... and I don't dislike it either.

"I never thought you'd invite me. Are you going to stop ignoring me?"

"I wanted to talk because it's impossible to continue that."

Mikiya makes a frowning face. I continue, feeling as if SHIKI's personality is being ever more strongly intermixed with my own.

"You said that I am not the killer."

The sunset is so red and vivid that I cannot see his face.

"I'm sorry. I am a killer. Why do you let me go even after seeing that scene?"

Mikiya looks dumbstruck.

"There's nothing to let go, because you never did such a thing."

"Even if I admit it myself?"

Mikiya nods.

"You're the one who told me not to listen to you too seriously. And you're definitely incapable of doing such a thing... ever."

I grow angry at Mikiya for saying something such as this, even though he has no idea of my true situation.

"What do you mean "definitely"?! What about me can you understand?! What about me can you trust?!"

I vent my anger at him. Mikiya makes a troubled face but smiles nevertheless.

"I have no basis for it, but I will continue to believe in you. I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you."

That did it. A pure power... these words erase all else with their purity.

This unassuming phrase to him is happiness for Shiki and the destruction that she could never get away from. I was just shown the world I could never live in by this happy person.

...A world in which you can live with someone else must be a happy world.

...But I do not know such a world.

...But I probably do not know such a world.

If I get to know someone, SHIKI will kill that person because SHIKI's reason for existence is to deny. And since my reason is to affirm, I cannot exist without denial. Since I have never been attracted to anything, I was able to distance myself from this contradiction. Now that I know, the more I wish for it, the more I know this wish is hopeless. That fact really hurts and I detest it. For the first time, I detest Mikiya from the bottom of my heart.

... Mikiya laughs like it's nothing.

Even though I can never be there.

I cannot stand his existence. I know for sure now. Mikiya will bring forth my destruction...

"You're stupid."

I tell him from the bottom of my heart.

"Yeah, I get told that a lot."

I exit the classroom. The sunset blazes red behind me. As I leave, I ask him without turning.

"Are you going to come again tonight?"

"Huh.....?"

He sounds surprised. I guess he didn't know I had noticed his "stake-outs". Mikiya tries to shrug it off but I stop him.

"Answer me."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but I'll go if I feel like it."

I leave the classroom. Gray clouds loom across in the red sky. From the look of the dark, heavy clouds...

I think it will rain tonight.

/ 5

Night.

The dark clouds start to shower rain upon the earth. The countless droplets pattering against the ground send a clamor against the hazy night, and the cold air belies the typical March weather. Among the wet bamboo leaves, Kokutou Mikiya stares at the Ryougi mansion. The hand holding his umbrella grows red and sore, and he heaves a great sigh - even he doesn't plan on continuing this voyeuristic charade for much longer. It would be great if the killer were to be caught in the time that he was doing this, but Mikiya has decided to quit if nothing happens for another week.

...Standing in the rain sure is tiring. The coldness and the rain hit hard. Mikiya is just barely getting used to all this.

....*Sigh*

Not because of the rain but rather as a result of Shiki's actions today. What can Mikiya get across to her when she thinks he doesn't trust her? At that time, Shiki seemed really fragile, so much so that Mikiya thought she was crying.

The rain does not stop.

The black puddles on the ground ripple endlessly.

A tremendous splash.

Mikiya turns in the direction of the sound.

A red figure is standing facing him.

A girl in red. Sodden with rain.

Not even holding an umbrella, the girl is drenched as if she has just come out of the ocean. Her black hair clings to her forehead and her eyes look empty.

"...Shiki"

Mikiya quickly runs to her. How long has this girl been out in the rain? The red kimono is sticking to her ice-cold body. Mikiya hands her the umbrella and takes out a towel from his bag.

"Here, wipe yourself with this. What are you doing? Your house is right there."

Mikiya reaches out his hand. She laughs at his defenselessness.

"..... Huh?"

It happens even before he notices. The hand that reached out to her feels something hot, and Mikiya recoils. A warm sensation flows down his arm.

Cut?

On the arm?

Why?

It doesn't move?

The pain is so sharp, it cannot be perceived as normal pain. It hurts so much that his senses begin to go numb. There's no time for Mikiya to think. The girl in red he thought of as "Shiki" moves. Maybe it's because Mikiya has seen something terrible here already, but his mind is not panicking yet. Jumping back calmly, he runs off.

...No, there was no way he could get away.

The instant Mikiya moves, she dashes towards him. Her speed is beast-like. Mikiya hears a slicing sound from around his feet. Red liquid intermixes with the pooled rainwater. Noticing that it is his own blood, Mikiya falls to the floor, face-up.

"Agh..."

He groans as his back slams into the ground. The girl in red straddles Mikiya's body, determination burning in her eyes. She places her knife at Mikiya's throat. Mikiya can do naught but look up at the events unfolding in front of him.

There is only darkness... and *her*.

There's no emotion in those black eyes. She is serious, resolute. The tip of the knife touches Mikiya's throat. Maybe because the rain is pouring down on her, the girl looks like she's crying.

But there's no expression. No emotion.

That blank, crying mask of a face is frightening, and at the same time, pitiful.

"Kokuto, say something."

She'll listen to his last words. In spite of his trembling body, Mikiya looks unwaveringly into Shiki's eyes.

"I... don't want to... die..."

These words are not directed at Shiki, but rather at the rapidly impending *death* itself.

Not at Shiki.

She smiles.

"I want to kill you."

A warm smile.

Kara no Kyoukai / Opening

July, 1998.

I safely finish my first job since being employed at Touko-san's office. It was really more of a secretary's job; all I had done was get a lawyer to approve a stack of contracts for me. I'm discontent with being treated like a beginner, but I know that it's all I really deserve after having dropped out of college.

"Mikiya-kun, isn't today supposed to be the day you go to the hospital?"

"Yes, I'll go after work."

"You can take your leave early, there's nothing to do anyway."

Touko-san is always a really nice person when she has her glasses on. Today is one of those lucky days and she is cleaning the handle of her magnificent vehicle.

"I'll head off then. I should be back in about two hours."

"Bring me back something nice!"

Leaving Touko-san behind, I leave the office.

Once a week, on Saturday afternoon, I go to visit her. I go visit Ryougi Shiki, the girl that has been unable to speak since that night. I don't know what kind of trouble she was going through or what she tried to do. I don't even know why she tried to kill me, but her smile at the very last moment was enough for me. As Gakuto said, I have been crazy about Shiki for a very long time; a single close call with death isn't going to change that.

Shiki, who's sleeping in the hospital room, has remained unchanged since that night.

I remember that day when Shiki and I were talking in the classroom as the sun set. She asked me what part of her I could believe in. I repeat my answer from back then.

... I have no basis for it, but I will continue to believe in you. I like you, so I want to keep on believing in you...

...What an immature answer. I had said I had no basis, but of course I did. I can declare with confidence that she would never kill anyone, because Shiki herself knows the pain of murder.

She is the victim and the assailant. She knows more than anyone how grievous murder is.

That's why I believe in her. Shiki, who cannot be harmed; and SHIKI, who only knows harm.

She was always so fragile, like she was about to be hurt.

You could not let out your true feelings even once...

The three pieces are in place.

A person with two bodies that floats with reliance on death.

A non-adaptable existence which takes pleasure from being in contact with death.

A person with an awakened origin who turns to its ego by running away to death.

They all intertwine with one another and wait at the spiral of conflict.

3 Remaining Sense of Pain

ever cry. never life.

When I was still small, I once cut my hand while playing house.

Borrowed things, imitated things, fabricated things...

A real one was mixed in with all those cooking utensils.

While I was playing with this sharp toy, I cut myself between the fingers.

I returned to my mother with my hand red and painful,

I remember her scolding me, then crying, and then kindly embracing me.

Mother said it must have hurt.

I was happy, not because of those words that I did not understand; rather, I was happier about the fact that mother embraced me, so I started crying with my mother.

"Fujino, the pain will go away once the cut heals..."

Mother said so as she wrapped bandages around me.

I did not know what those words meant...

Because not even once did I feel any pain.

/Remaining Sense of Pain

/0

"You brought an unusual letter of introduction."

I'm at a university laboratory. An old man, whose white lab coat suited him well, offers me a handshake with a reptilian smile.

"Wow, supernatural powers? You're interested in such things?"

"No, I just want to know what kind of things they are."

"That's what you call "interest". Doesn't matter. To use her card as a letter... that's just like her. She was an outstanding student of mine, so I'm concerned about her. This place is getting fewer competent people, so we don't have enough human resources. Yup, not enough is not good."

"Um, about the supernatural powers..."

"Oh yeah, supernatural powers... But, there are many different kinds of powers. We don't measure them genuinely here, so I don't know if I can help you. In my occupation, this is an ominous subject, so only a few laboratories study it in Japan. This thing is a black box, you know, so the real details don't get to me. Yeah, I heard it's getting practical, but I have to wonder. That thing is, you know, something you have to have when you are born..."

"I really don't care about the classification. Either way, I think of them as psionic powers. What I want to know is how people end up with these powers."

"They're like channels. You watch TV?"

"Well, yeah... but what about it?"

"You can compare the human brain to channels. Which channel do you usually watch?"

"...Let's see... I guess it's channel 8."

"That's it. That should be the channel with the highest rating, right? Let's say there are 12 channels in a human brain. The brains of you and me are always on channel 8, the channel with the highest rating. There are other channels but we can't go there. The channel that everyone watches... should I say "common sense"? Channel 8 is the channel we have to be on in order to live within that common sense. Do you understand?"

"...Um, so you're saying we're made to watch the safest programs?"

"No no. It's for the best. The common sense of the 20th century, the channel with the highest rating is channel 8. Since we can be on it, that's the most peaceful channel, right? We live in that common sense and we are protected by that common sense... isn't it beautiful?"

"You're saying other channels are not peaceful?"

"I don't know. Let's say channel 3 is a channel that receives the words of plants instead of people. Let's say that on channel 4, the brain waves making your body move actually move something else. It's amazing to have these kinds of channels. There, the common sense airing on channel 8 doesn't exist. Since the most popular channel shows the common sense needed to live in this current world, other channels do not show such a thing. At the very least, the morals of channel 8 are not shown."

"So you mean not having channel 8 would make you mentally abnormal?"

"Yup. Say there's someone that only has channel 3. That person can talk to plants, but in turn, cannot talk to people. As a result, society treats that person as mentally disabled and locks them up in a sanitarium. That's what it means for a person to have supernatural powers. It's a person who has had different channels compared to everyone else since the time the person was born. But, most people with supernatural powers have such channels as 4 and 8 at the same time and can switch between them. They're channels that you can switch between when you want to, right? When you watch channel 4, you can't watch channel 8. When you watch channel 8, you can't watch channel 4. People with supernatural powers in society live by using both of them, the usual self and the abnormal self."

"I see. So that's why common sense is useless for the person who only has channel 4... because there wouldn't be such a thing to begin with."

"That's right. Society calls these people maniacs or killers but we think of them as an "unfit existence". There are many people who are unfit for society, but these people are unfit right from the start of their existence. They are people who shouldn't exist... no, they cannot exist. This is a "what-if" story, okay? If there was someone who had both channel 4 and 8 and something happened to that person to destroy his or her body, causing that person to be permanently on channel 4, that would be the end. Even though the person may have had all the common sense, if unable to be on the same channel as us, communicating with us becomes impossible... because the person is on a different channel."

"Is there a way to make the unfit into a fit existence?"

"You can just end their life. To put it more precisely, you have to destroy the abnormal channel. But to do so means to destroy their brain, so it comes down to killing them. There's no such thing as killing the channel without killing the body. If there is, that's what you would really call a supernatural power. That's around channel 12, I think? That channel can pretty much do anything."

The professor laughs like it is really funny.

"That was helpful. By the way, is spoon bending the most popular psionic power?"

"What? Spoons can bend?"

"I don't know about spoons, but at least human arms."

"You mean the arms of an adult? That's pretty amazing. "Distortion" depends on the object's size rather than its hardness. I would think it should take about seven days to bend something like the human arm. So, which way is it? Right? Left?"

"Does that matter?"

"Of course. It has something to do with the fulcrum. Even Earth has a direction of rotation, right? What, it's not constant? Hmm... does such a power actually exist? Then you shouldn't have anything to do with this person. This person has more than two channels. That unfit existence can probably rotate things in both directions. I have never heard of a case of someone having two channels and able to use them both at once; it's too powerful."

"Um... I don't have much time, so I should get going. I have to get to Nagano by today... so thank you for all your help."

"It's all right. You can come as often as you want, since it’s her introduction. Oh, and by the way... is Aozaki-kun doing well?"

/1

Still a bit dazed, Asagami Fujino raises herself up. There is no one in this room except Fujino. The light is off... no, there was no such thing to begin with. Only deep darkness surrounds her.

"Hmm...."

Letting out a breath, Fujino feels her own hair. The tuft on the left side has been cut off. It was probably by that guy with a knife who was on top of her a second ago. Remembering that, she finally looks around the room. This place is a bar built into a basement. It was abandoned half a year ago due to bankruptcy and became a place where the bad kids would hang out. ...In the corner of the room is a pipe chair. ...In the middle of the room is a pool table. ...Food from convenience stores is scattered around, and a pile of trash is stacked up. It seems these things are creating the disturbing odor. Fujino becomes displeased by the sickening smell in the room. This place is a ruin... or is it some back-alley slum in a faraway country? One cannot even imagine that a normal city exists on the other side of the stairway. The only normal thing here is the smell of the alcohol lamp they brought in.

"Umm...."

She looks around in a rather well-mannered fashion. Fujino's mind is not fully functional yet. ...She still has not taken in what has been happening until now. She picks up a wrist that happens to be by her feet. There is a watch on the severed wrist. The digital screen shows "July 20, 1998". Time is 8PM, not even an hour after that incident.

"Guh...!"

Fujino groans from the sudden agony. There is a great pain in her stomach area. She twists her body, not able to withstand the squeezing pain. Her hands touch the floor, making a splashing sound. She looks and realizes the whole room is filled with liquid.

"Yes, come to think of it, it is raining today."

Talking to herself, Fujino stands up. She looks at her stomach. There is a trace of blood there... the place where she was stabbed by these people scattered around here.

◇

The one who stabbed Fujino was an infamous person in town. He stood out more than most of the others that dropped out of high school and was seen as the leader of the misfits in the area. He gathered people that liked the same things as him, and did what they wanted. As part of the fun, they raped Fujino. Not for any particular reason. Probably because Fujino was a student of the Reien Ladies' Academy and also quite beautiful. As they were violent and selfish, they were not satisfied with abusing her just once. It seems they knew they could be accused for their actions, but they changed their minds when they found out that Fujino hadn't told anyone and was agonizing over it by herself. They found out they were the ones in power and they brought Fujino into this place many times. Tonight was another one of those times, and they were completely relaxed, but also getting bored of the banal act. The guy probably brought out the knife to bring some excitement into this routine. The leader of the kids' pride had been hurt since Fujino had lived normally even after they had raped her. He wanted definite proof that he was the one who ruled over her. In preparation for an act of extreme violence, he readied a knife, but the girl only made a cool face. He got angry at the girl whose expression didn't change, even after having a knife pressed to her face, so he pushed her down and...

◇

"I can't go outside like this."

Fujino downcasts her eyes as she feels her blood-soaked self. Her blood is only on her stomach, but she is dirtied by someone else's blood from the top of her hair to the bottom of her shoes. It seems it cannot be easily washed off. Fujino murmurs to herself.

"How stupid of me... getting this dirty."

She kicks at one of the limbs scattered around the floor.

Am I angrier at getting dirtied by their blood than at the fact that they have violated me up to now?

Fujino thinks, as she is surprised by her own rage. It's raining outside... there should be less people walking around in about an hour. Even though it's raining, it's summertime so it shouldn't be too cold. I'll soak myself in the rain and then wash off the blood at some park. ...As she reaches that solution, she suddenly calms down. She walks away from the pool of blood and finally counts the corpses scattered around. One, two, three, four... four..... four..... four, no matter how many times I count!! She is astonished. ...One is missing...

"One has gotten away, huh...?"

She murmurs faintly.

Then I will be caught by the police. If he goes to them, I will be arrested. But... will he go to the police? How will he be able to explain the situation? Will he start by telling them about raping me, Asagami Fujino, and threatening me not to tell anyone? Not possible. Such a thing is impossible, and these people should not have the brains to come up with a convincing story.

Fujino relaxes a bit and lights the lamp on the pool table. The light from the lamp lights the whole room. The 16 scattered arms and legs show up clearly. If you look for them, you should also be able to find four bodies and heads. Brightened by the orange light, the room

is washed anew with red paint, as if it has gone mad. Fujino does not care much about this disastrous scene. ... One has escaped. Her revenge is not complete yet... Fortunately, it has not ended.

"Would I have to take revenge...?"

Fujino fears the idea of having to kill another person. Her body trembles, telling her such a thing is impossible to do; but she herself will be in danger if she doesn't. Still, she does not want to do any more bad things... Those are her true feelings.

...The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Remaining Sense of Pain

1

July nears its end and my surroundings have started to fill with all sorts of weird events, like a friend who has been in a coma for two years finally regaining consciousness; like finishing the second big job at my workplace; and like my sister whom I haven't seen for five years coming to see me. The nineteenth summer of me, Kokutou Mikiya, started in such a commotion.

Today was one of my rare days off, but I accompanied my high school friend to go drinking. I noticed I had missed the last train. Others took cabs home, but as my payday is tomorrow, I do not have such extra money. It can't be helped, so I decide to walk home. Fortunately, my house is only two stations away from here. The date has just changed from July 20 to July 21.

Past midnight, I walk through the night town alone. Since tomorrow is a weekday, the shopping district is fast asleep. It rained hard tonight. It had stopped before midnight, but the asphalt still shows signs of the rain as the wet ground makes splashing sounds. It is the middle of summer and the temperature is way above 30 degrees. The hot night air and the humidity from the rain irritate me. I see a girl crouched on the sidewalk. A girl wearing a black school uniform is holding her stomach in pain as she crouches at the guardrail. ... I notice the nun-like uniform. That plain but party dress-like fancy design is of the Reien Ladies' Academy. According to Gakuto, it's really famous to those kinds of people, as they say it's like a maid's outfit. ...It's not that I'm one of those people, but I know because my sister goes there.

"I heard all the students there lived in dorms..."

But to see her here at this time is too strange. She must be in some kind of trouble, or is just a bad student who doesn't follow the school rules. With my sister going to the same school and all, I decide to talk to her. When I call to her, she slowly turns to me and her long hair sways.

"....."

It seems the girl gasped really faintly. She has really long hair. Her eyes look calm and she too looks calm. Her face is small... it's cute but she also has some handsome features. That balance is more like Japanese beauty. Her long hair is cast straight behind her and a small section of it is separated around her ears to drape down to her breast. It seems the left side of her hair has been cut though. Her fringe is cut straight and it reminds me of a good lady from a respected family.

"Yes? What is it?"

The girl asks with a pale face. Her lips are purple. It's obvious she has cyanosis. She has one of her hands on her stomach, her face twisted in pain.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"No, um... I, um..."

She tries to act calm yet her words are not. The girl looks rather fragile. She gives the impression that she's going to break down any second, just like Shiki when I first met her.

"You're a student of the Reien Academy, right? Did you miss your train? That place is far from here. Do you want me to go get a taxi for you?"

"No, it's all right. I don't have any money."

"Yeah, I don't have any either."

The girl looks at me in surprise. ... I realize that I gave a surprisingly stupid reply.

"I see. Then your house must be near here. I heard everyone there lived in a dorm but I guess you're allowed to go out."

"No, my house is a long way away."

I tilt my head in wonder.

"Then is it something like running away?"

"Yes, I think that is what I have to resort to."

... I'm troubled. Looking at her, the girl is soaked. Maybe she didn't find cover in that rain earlier but she is dripping wet. ... Since that time, I've hated girls wet with rain. That must be why these words came out of my mouth.

"You want to come to my place just for tonight?"

"Can I...?"

Still sitting down, she looks at me as if she's desperate. I nod.

"I live alone, so there's no problem. But I won't make any guarantees. I don't have any bad intentions, but if anything weird happens, I might get "in the mood." I'm a healthy man so take that into consideration too. If you're still okay with that, then come along. Unfortunately, it's before my payday so I can't give you much, but I should at least have some painkillers."

The girl becomes happy. That defenseless and pure smile also makes me happy. When I extend my hands to her, she gracefully gets up.

... It seemed there are red stains where the girl has been sitting...

I take this unknown girl with me and start walking through the night town again.

"We're going to walk a bit, but tell me if you're suffering. I should at least be able to carry a girl on my back."

"Yes, but my wound is healed so it doesn't hurt."

She says so, but her hand is still on her stomach. It's obvious she's in some kind of pain. I ask her again.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

The girl denies it and grows quiet again. We walk a bit more. After a small silence, the girl shakes her head.

"... Yes. It really, really hurts. I'm about to cry... can I cry?"

When I nod, the girl closes her eyes looking satisfied. It looks as if she is watching a dream.

◇

The girl did not tell me her name so I decide not to tell her mine either. I feel that it's more romantic that way. Once we get to the apartment, the girl says she wants to borrow the shower. She also says she wants to dry her clothes so I decide to stay outside. Giving her a cheap excuse that I'm going to go buy some smokes, I leave the room. I feel that I am really good natured as I'm going out to buy these things that I would not smoke.

After spending about an hour outside and coming back, I find her asleep on the sofa. I set my alarm clock to seven thirty and lie on my bed. As I fall asleep, I worry about the cut in her uniform near her stomach.

◇

When I wake up the next morning, the girl is sitting in the living room as she has nothing to do. She gives me a bow once she notices I'm awake.

"Thank you for last night. I cannot do anything in return but I am really thankful."

The girl gets up and starts to leave. ... I feel a bit guilty about making her sit and wait just to say that to me.

"Wait, at least stay and get some breakfast."

The girl obediently follows what I say. The only things left are pasta and olive oil so naturally, our breakfast becomes spaghetti. I quickly make it for the two of us and carry it to the table to eat. Since it's so quiet, I turn on the TV and see a terrible news broadcast.

"... Wow, this is the kind of story Touko-san would like."

I murmur something aloud, so that if she were here, she would be throwing something at me. ... But that's how weird the contents of the news are. I listen to the newscaster who talks about what happened last night.

Last night, in the basement of a bar that has been abandoned for half a year, four dead bodies were found. It seems all four victims had their limbs torn off and the scene of the crime was soaked in a pool of blood. The place is pretty close to here, maybe around four stations away from last night's place. It's strange that they said the limbs were torn off rather than cut off, but the news does not elaborate much on it, and rather goes into the information on the victims.

All four of the victims were high-schoolers, and they were just kids that played around near that place. It seems they did some drugs too, and a person who the newscaster is interviewing is talking about the victims' personal lives.

.....I think they deserved to die, those kids.

Those words flow from the TV and I get annoyed by this speaking ill of the dead, so I turn off the television. Looking at the girl, she is placing her hand painfully on her stomach. Seeing that she hasn't taken a bite of food, she might be really hurt. I can't see her expression as she is looking down.

"..... There's nobody that deserves to die."

She says so with ragged breath.

"Why... I'm healed, so why...?!"

The girl gets up from the chair and runs to the door. I quickly follow her but she raises her hand to stop me. It seems she does not want me to go near her.

"Wait. I think you should calm down."

"It's all right. I knew it... I cannot go back."

Her face twists in pain. The face that bears a pain seems similar to Shiki. The girl calms down and bows at me before she opens the door.

"Good bye. I never want to see you again."

The girl leaves just like that. Her face is that of a Japanese doll, with the exception of her eyes.

They seemed like she was about to cry.

2

After the incident with the unknown girl, I head to my workplace. There is no official name for the place where I work. Its specialty is doll-making, but most of the jobs we get are construction-related. The president, Aozaki Touko, is a woman in her late twenties and she is a weirdo that would buy an abandoned building to make her office. It means that this is not a company, but rather an extension of her hobby. There are many reasons why I

decided to work here, but this is my daily life now. I have complaints but I have no troubles. I think I am rather fortunate. There are problems but they are all things I can bear.

... While thinking, I arrive at the building. It is four stories high, and the office is on the fourth floor. This building situated between the residential and the industrial districts feels rather empty. It's not that tall, yet it seems to put pressure on the ones looking up to it. There are no elevators, so I go up the stairs.

When I enter the office, I see an unusual person amongst the usual junk scattered about. A girl with sharp eyes wearing a black kimono turns towards me. ... The kimono has a fish pattern on it...

"Huh, Shiki? Why are you here at such a place?"

"Sorry that this place is "such a place". It happens to be your workplace, Kokutou."

Touko-san, who is sitting behind Shiki, glares at me. She is dressed as plainly as always with a cigarette in her mouth. She is wearing black pants with a white shirt, and an earring in one of her ears: orange, of course. I don't know why, but she seems to have this habit of always wearing something orange.

"But you sure are here early today. I told you there are no jobs for a while, so you should show up around noon."

"No, I can't do that."

That's right. My wallet is not allowing me to do that. I feel rather uneasy when the only things in my wallet are my train pass and a telephone card.

"By the way, why is Shiki here?"

"I called for her. I've got something I need her for."

Shiki does not say anything, but rubs her eyes sleepily. ... Was she walking around at night again? ... It's only been about a month since she recovered from her coma. For some reason, we're finding it rather uncomfortable to talk to each other. It seems Shiki does not want to talk so I sit down at my own desk. ...There's nothing to do, so I decide to talk. Fortunately, there is a topic handy.

"Touko-san, did you see the news this morning?"

"You must mean the Broad Bridge. It's not like some foreign country, I don't think Japan needs that big of a bridge."

I recoil at her comment. What she is talking about is a big bridge, about 800 meters long, that is planned to finish construction next year. The town we live in is close to the port. If you drive for about 20 minutes, you can get to the port, but the shape itself is troublesome. To put it simply, there is another side to it. If you look at it on a map, it looks like a crescent moon, and a long roundabout is forced if you want to get from the top to the bottom. The city's construction group teamed up with a big construction company and put into action what they said was the solution to the public complaints. They are building a straight route across the tips of the crescent shape in the form of a bridge. ... Of course, most of the money to build this is coming from our taxes. I think it is a typical case of the government saying they are solving public complaints which did not exist from the start, only resulting

in more public complaints. The bridge is also to have museums, aquariums, big parking lots and such, and you can't really tell whether it's a bridge or an amusement park. It was called Baybridge until recently but according to what Touko-san is saying, I guess its name has officially been announced as Broad Bridge. Both Touko-san and I do not like the idea of this bridge.

"But Touko-san, even though you hate the idea, you already have a space in there for your gallery."

"It's not of my will. A person I know just gave me that space as a payment. I could just sell it off but since I have some relations with the Asagami construction company, I can't just do that. Geez, a place that won't make me money is worthless."

From the way she's talking, she seems to be having trouble with money. I get a really bad feeling.

"Um, I don't want to say this so bluntly, but can I have my pay?"

"Kokutou, about that... unfortunately, I don't have any money. It's unfortunate, but I'll have to pay you all next month."

Touko-san declares so calmly. She sounds like I'm the bad guy instead.

"Wait a minute! You had 1.12 million yen in the bank yesterday! How could you say it's all gone!?"

Touko-san replies, while rocking on her chair, that it's because she used it all. Shiki is looking at Touko-san with some jealousy. ...Certainly, Touko-san looks like she's having fun in that chair. No, I don't care about that right now.

"What did you use the money on, Touko-san?"

"Oh, what I bought was this boring thing. It's an Ouija board from the Victorian age. I can't expect much out of its effect, but it's not totally worthless because it's over a hundred years old. No matter how uninteresting it is, some mana and a large amount of time will give it some additional value. Well, it still makes no difference even if it's useless. If I have to give a reason for buying it, you could say it's part of my hobby."

I just don't understand this person. This person called Aozaki Touko is a magus. I always think how much better it would have been if she was just a magician or something, but that's the truth so I have to accept it. The magus continues her excuse.

"It suddenly appeared on sale, so I bought it on impulse. Don't get so angry. I'm out of money too."

... Don't be angry? That's asking too much. As I have seen many miracles from her, I'd thought this part of her was rather playful, but I cannot be that tolerant today.

"So is that it? I'm not getting paid this month?"

"Yeah. Get some money from somewhere else."

I get up from my seat.

"Then I'm going to go find some money to live off of this month so I'm leaving early. Is that all right?"

"Fine. By the way, Kokutou, I need to ask you a favor."

Touko-san says this in a different tone. Maybe it has to do something with the fact that Shiki is here... I calm down and stop.

"What is it, Touko-san?"

"Can you lend me some money? I'm broke as you can see."

"..... I refuse with all my might."

I close the door hard and leave the office.

◇

After looking at the conversation between Mikiya and Touko for a while, Shiki finally opens her mouth.

"Touko, about that thing."

"That's right. I don't really like to accept this kind of a job but I won't be able to live without money. .....Geez, I'm going mad over money when I'm not an alchemist. This is all because Kokutou won't lend me any money."

Touko sticks her cigarette into the ashtray saying she's in a bad mood. Shiki thinks Mikiya is probably in a worse mood than her.

"Well, about that incident last night..."

"I've heard enough. I know what's going on."

"I see..... I only explained to you the scene of the crime, but you already know? You're pretty sharp."

Touko looks meaningfully at Shiki. Touko has only explained the results of the murder that occurred between 7PM and 8PM last night and Shiki is saying she understood what kind of crime it was. This is definite proof that Shiki is a person closer to the world Touko lives in.

"The client has some idea of the killer. Your job is to take her under your care if possible, but if she happens to fight back even slightly... the client said to kill her."

Shiki nods. The job description is easy. Find the killer, and kill her.

"But what about after that?"

"If you happen to kill her, they will clean it up and treat it as an accident. For the client, she is already socially dead. It is not against the law to kill a dead person. What do you want to do? I think this job rather suits you."

"I don't even need to answer that question."

Saying that, Shiki starts to walk out the office.

"You're in such a hurry. Were you hungry, Shiki?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Here's her picture and her status. What were you going to do without knowing what she looks like?"

Shiki looks at Touko, who throws her the file containing the information. It drops to the floor.

"I don't need it. That killer is definitely of my kind. ... So if we were to meet, we'd try to kill each other at that very instant."

Shiki departs from the office, leaving only the sound of her kimono and a cold glare.

◇

It can't be helped. After leaving the office, I decide to borrow some money from a friend of mine. We choose to meet at the cafeteria of the college that I quit in June. A bit after noon, Gakuto arrives. He has grown much bigger since high school. When I tell him what I came for, he makes a troubled face.

"I'm surprised. Calling for someone just to borrow money? Are you really Kokutou Mikiya?"

"Yeah. You're special to me. You should be happy about that."

"Heh, who would be? Besides, why don't you go borrow from your relatives?"

"I haven't seen my parents ever since that fight I got into with them when I dropped out of college. How do you expect me to go back and ask such a thing now?"

"Haha, you're pretty stubborn. Was it a big fight?"

"That has nothing to do with you. So, are you going to lend me some money or not?"

"Hm? You're in a pretty bad mood today."

I glare at him saying that it's none of his business, but Gakuto agrees to lend me some money.

"If I put your name out, I bet I would be able to collect fifty or sixty thousand yen quite quickly... and if you still need more, I could lend you some of my money. But, not for free."

... It seems he also has a favor to ask of me. Gakuto looks around, and makes sure no one is listening.

"Well, to put it simply, I want you to look for someone. It's one of our underclassmen, but he hasn't returned home. It seems he's been involved in a strange crime."

Gakuto's story is unsettling. The name of the missing underclassman is Minato Keita. He has been missing since last night and Gakuto says that he was a member of the group that was killed last night. Minato Keita contacted one of his friends last night, but it seems he was acting strangely, so that friend went to Gakuto for help.

"Keita was saying something like he was going to be killed. That's the only call he made and he doesn't even answer his cell phone now. According to the guy who talked to him, he was really screwed up."

Screwed up... he must mean drugs... Easy drugs for beginners are cheap and relatively easy to get nowadays. Even a high schooler could get their hands on L if they tried; but they shouldn't be trying in the first place...

"... Hey now. Do you think such a violent world suits me?"

"What are you saying? Looking for people is your specialty."

I grow quiet.

"That guy Keita, does he do drugs?"

"No, the ones who used them were the ones who were killed. Don't you remember Keita? He's one of the kids that liked you."

... During high school, I was liked by some underclassmen for some reason. Maybe because I'm a friend of Gakuto or something.

"It would make things easier if he were just tripping on a new drug. What kind of drugs do they use? Uppers or Downers?"

There are two types of drugs: Uppers, the ones that make you mentally high and feel good; and Downers, the ones that make you depressed. The one Gakuto names is an Upper.

"It's terrible if he's using drugs to escape his fears. The killer really might be after this kid. All right, I'll look into this. Tell me about his friends."

Gakuto hands me an address book as if he was ready for me to say so. Having lots of friends is characteristic of the members of that group and it seems he's no exception. Many names with their cell phone numbers; along with each group's hangout place, are written.

"I'll contact you once I find him. I might be able to get him under my protection but you wouldn't care, would you?"

By "protection", I mean handing him over to Daisuke Nii-san, a cop. Gakuto nods, understanding. We reach an agreement. To start off my search, I borrow about twenty thousand yen from him.

After saying goodbye to Gakuto, I decide to go to the murder scene. I feel that I'll have to really try if I'm to find him. Even though I know I shouldn't concern myself with these matters, I also know that this kid is in danger, so I could not decline Gakuto.

/2

The phone starts to ring. It stops after five rings and switches to the answering machine. After a beeping noise, I hear a familiar voice leaving a message.

"Good morning, Shiki. Can you do me a favor? I'm supposed to meet Azaka at a cafe called Ahnen erbe near the station at noon but I don't think I can make it. You have nothing to do, right? Can you go there and tell her I can't come?"

The caller hangs up. ... I move my tired body and look at the clock by the bed... "July 22, 7:23AM". It's only been about four hours since I came home. My body still wants sleep, maybe because I've been walking around town until three in the morning ever since I accepted Touko's job. I pull up my sheets. The summer heat does not really matter to me. I was able to tolerate hot and cold weather rather well as a kid, and it still seems that way now. As I lie there for a while, the phone rings again. It switches to the answering machine and this time, I hear a voice I'd rather not hear.

"It's me. Did you see the news? You didn't see it, right? You don't have to see it. I didn't see it either."

... I always thought so, but now I'm confident. The way she thinks is far removed from the way I think. One should not understand the real meaning behind Touko's words.

"There were three deaths last night. Another one of those suicides jumping off a building and two "crimes of passion". None of these are in the news so I'm guessing they were all treated as accidents. But there's one strange case. If you want to know more, come to my place. Actually, you don't have to. Come to think of it, this will do. All right... I'll put it simply so even you'll understand with that sleepy head of yours. Just now, there was another victim."

The caller hangs up. I get pissed off. It has nothing to do with me, even if there is another victim. Even the things around me are uncertain, so this information is useless to me. The death of someone I don't even know about makes less impression on me than the sunlight striking my body.

I finally get up when the weariness in me goes away. I make breakfast the same way the previous Shiki has done for 16 years of her life. I eat it and get ready to go outside. I put on a simple orange kimono today. Since I'll be walking around town, this is what I prefer. ..... Even my choice of clothing is only a habit from the past. I bite my tongue at the feeling

that I'm looking at someone else from outside. Two years ago, when Ryougi Shiki was still 17, I wasn't like this. It's not that the two years of coma changed me. ... The empty two years brought me something else. It feels like I am not moving of my own volition. I always get this feeling that the strings called "16 years as Ryougi Shiki" are moving me like a puppet. But it has to be just my feelings. No matter how much I curse myself for being empty and fictitious, in the end, I am moving of my own will. It is impossible for anything other than me to interfere with that.

When I finish changing, the time is almost eleven. I repeat the first message on the answering machine. The voice I have heard many times in the past repeats itself. The voice that was lost in the air is recorded like this.

...Kokutou Mikiya

The last person I saw two years ago...

The classmate that saw me let my guard down two years ago...

I know my past with him, but only the vision of our last moment is not there. No, the memory of the year since I got to know him is full of holes. Many important parts are missing. Why Shiki got in that accident.... Why she was looking at Mikiya's face at that moment... It would be really handy if the forgotten memories were recorded somewhere. I am concerned about the missing memories and it is causing me to not be able to talk to Mikiya naturally.

... The answering machine stops. It's strange that my worries go away a bit when I hear his voice. It makes me feel like I have a firm foundation, but there's no way something like a voice could be a foundation. That should be an illusion too. It probably is an illusion. The only reality I can feel now is the burning excitement I get when I kill people.

◇

Ahnen erbe turns out to be an antique cafe. I check the name written in German and go inside. It's past noon but there aren't many customers inside. I don't know how they built it, but it is dark inside. Only the tables near the door are lit - the back of the cafe, with the counters, is rather dark. The only light is coming through the four square windows in the walls. The tables by those windows are also lit, as if cut out of the darkness. Maybe it's because of the strong sunlight but the contrast feels rather majestic. Kokutou Azaka is sitting at the table in the very back. Two girls in western-style uniform are waiting for Mikiya, side by side.

"Two...?"

That's not what I heard. According to Mikiya, only Azaka should be waiting. I didn't hear about this other girl. I look at them as I walk towards them. They both have long straight black hair. They have similar features and they are beautiful, fit for students at a Ladies Academy, even though their atmospheres are totally the opposite. Azaka has firm eyes and the strength to face up anything: even her ladylike attitude can't hide this. Mikiya was liked because of his personal charm, but Azaka would be the one that would be admired because

of her strictness. The girl next to Azaka looks rather weak. Her posture looks firm and graceful, but she gives the impression that she might break down any second.

"Azaka."

I come close to their table and call out. Azaka looks at me and frowns.

"Ryougi... Shiki."

The voice is filled with enmity. She doesn't even try to hide it. That ladylike exterior is just a facade.

"I am waiting for Nii-san. I have nothing to do with you."

Azaka says, staying calm.

"I have a message from that Nii-san of yours. He said he can't make it. He ditched you."

Azaka gasps. Maybe because the fact that he could not come is a big shock, or maybe because I was the one to come tell her that.

"Shiki, it must be your doing...!"

Azaka's fist trembles. I guess she's shocked that I came.

"Don't be stupid. I'm a victim too. He just selfishly told me to inform you that he can't make it."

Azaka looks at me with fire in her eyes. The girl next to her tries to calm Azaka, as though she might start throwing things if she weren't placated.

"Kokutou-san, everyone's surprised."

A thin voice. I step back.

"..... You're right, today was supposed to be for you. Sorry Fujino, it was wrong for me to get angry."

Azaka apologizes to the girl called Fujino. I look at the calm-looking girl. She is looking at me too.

"Does it..... not hurt?"

I say so unconsciously. The girl does not answer but just stares at me. Showing no interest, like watching a scenery, and inorganic like a bug. I now have two convictions in me. The intuition that this girl is my enemy and the actual feeling that she cannot be.

"... No, it can't be you."

In the end, I decide to trust my feelings. There is no way this girl, Fujino, would be able to enjoy murder. There is no reason for her to. No, first of all, it would be impossible for her thin arms to tear off things like human limbs. It would be a different story if she had abnormal eyes like me... I quickly lose interest in this girl and talk to Azaka.

"That's all. Do you have any messages for him?"

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""

◇

Azaka really leaves this kind of message.

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""

Azaka seriously told the woman in the kimono, the one called Shiki. I feel rather uneasy due to the thick and heavy air surrounding them. It feels like they have knives aimed at each other's throats and are looking for openings to actually cut each other. I get timid within this tight atmosphere. Now, I can only pray that nothing will occur. Fortunately, they stop talking and the woman wearing the kimono leaves gracefully. I stare at her back as she leaves. Shiki spoke with a very masculine tone. I couldn't tell her age because of that, but maybe she's around my age. Her last name was Ryougi... maybe it's *that* Ryougi; then her expensive looking kimono makes sense. I could see some designs worked into her kimono. If she is of the Ryougi, it's no surprise that she would have her own kimono maker.

"..... She was a beautiful person."

Azaka nods to my murmur. I think she's amazing for answering honestly even when she hates that person.

"But she is just as scary. ... I don't like that person."

Azaka looks surprised. Her surprise is completely natural. Even I am surprised at this feeling. Because probably for the first time in my life, I feel repulsion toward someone.

"That's unexpected. I thought you were someone that wouldn't hate anybody, but I guess I was wrong."

"Hate.....?"

... Dislike is the same as hate? I never thought so. I just feel that I cannot get along with that person. I try closing my eyes. Ryougi Shiki. Her ominous black hair, ominous white skin, and those ominous, bottomless, empty eyes. She was looking at me, so I looked back at her. That's why we saw what was hiding behind us. She only knows blood. She kills of her own will. She tries to hurt others. ... That woman is a killer.

But I am different. I think I am different. It's because I have never wanted to do such a thing. In the darkness behind my closed eyes, I repeat this over and over. But her figure would not disappear. ... We have not talked even once, but her figure is engraved into my mind.

"I'm sorry, Fujino. I ruined your day off."

I open my eyes to Azaka's words. I smile, like I have practiced.

"It's all right. I did not feel like it anyways."

"You do look quite pale. It's hard to tell because you're pretty white to begin with."

I did not feel like it for another reason, but I nod at her words anyways. ... I know my body is not doing well by its reaction, but I did not notice that it was bad enough to show on my face.

"I guess it can't be helped. I'll ask Mikiya myself, so do you want to go home for today?"

Azaka is worried about my health. I thank her.

"But is that message to your brother all right?"

"It's fine. I don't even know how many times I told him that anyways. He should be used to it. To tell you the truth, this a curse. Words that are repeated over and over can twist reality to lean towards that word. Really, a girly curse. It's sad and pitiful."

I don't know how serious she is but she explains so. I'm used to her impulsiveness. I decide to listen quietly to Azaka's beautiful voice. ... She is always number one academically in our school and she even ranks in the top ten nationwide. Azaka is a bit strange and has this gentlemanly side to her. Azaka is one of my friends from Reien Academy. Both of us entered that school from our high school. Since Reien is an "escalator" school from elementary school, it's rare for people to come starting from high school like us. We met because of that and are close enough that we even go out sometimes on weekends. Today, I was supposed, through Azaka, to have her brother look for someone.

I went to a local middle school and when I was there, a Senpai from a different school talked to me at an event. ... I had been depressed recently, but I was saved by thinking about this Senpai. When I told Azaka about it, she said we should look for this person. It happens that her brother is also from this area and he knows a lot of people around here. She said he is really good at looking for people our age. ... It's not that I really wanted to see him, but we ended up deciding to look for this person with me not being able to refuse the pushy Azaka. We were waiting for her brother today but it seems he could not come. ... I am relieved in a way.

I am not really into this whole thing because... I accidentally ran into him two days ago. At that time, I was able to say what I couldn't say three years ago. Since I have done what I wanted to do, there is no point in looking for this person anymore. Maybe Azaka's brother couldn't come because God knew I didn't need him anymore.

"Let's get going. It's hard to stay here over an hour buying just drinks."

Azaka gets up. Even though she should be sad about not being able to see her brother, she still gets up gracefully. Sometimes, she is really manly. Maybe because of the way she talks. Her formal tone disappears like just now and becomes cool like a man. It's not that she's disguising herself, but that's just a part of her. I really like this friend of mine. ..... That's why I shouldn't see her anymore.

"Azaka. Please go back to the dorm by yourself. I will be staying at my parents' house tonight again."

"Really? That's fine but Sister will be glaring at you if you stay out too much. You should restrain yourself."

Waving her hand, Azaka leaves the cafe. Being alone, I take a glance at the sign. "Ahnen erbe": it means "ancestral inheritance" in German.

◇

After Azaka leaves, I start walking aimlessly. It is a lie that I am going back to my parents' house. There is no place for me to go back to now. From that night two days ago, I have not

even been going to school. My father has probably been contacted already for unexcused absences. They will ask me what I was doing if I go back home. I am not good at telling lies so I might slip everything out. If that happens... father will contempt me.

I am my mother's child from her former marriage. Father only needed mother's house and land, so I was just something on the side since that time. That is why I worked hard not to be hated. A faithful woman like my mother, a student my father can be proud of, a normal girl nobody would be suspicious of..... ..... I always wanted to be that way.

Not for someone else, but for myself. I always dreamed that, and it has protected me. But it came to an end. Such magic is not around me no matter how much I look. I continue walking, the sun is starting to set. I walk past many irrelevant people and many stoplights which blink insensibly. People older than me, people younger than me, everyone looks so happy. My heart contracts in pain. I think of something and pinch my cheek. ..... I do not feel anything. I pinch harder. ..... Nothing. When I give up and let go, I notice that my fingertips are red. I guess I pinched hard enough that my nails dug into my skin. But I still feel nothing. I do not feel that I am alive.

"Fufu..."

I laugh thinking it's funny. Why does my heart feel pain when I myself do not feel any pain? First of all, what is heart? Is it my heart that's hurt or my brain? When the brain receives any words that are directed to attack an individual called Asagami Fujino, it creates a wound as protection. Since a wound lets a person know it hurts, whatever story I come up with is only a medicine that soothes the pain. That is why even though I cannot feel pain, I still understand pain in my heart. But that is probably just an illusion. Definitely an illusion. Real pain cannot be cured just by words. One quickly forgets a pain in their heart because it is so trivial; but a wound on your body gives you pain as long as the wound is there. That is a strong proof of life.

If my heart is my brain, then my brain should get a wound. Then I should be able to feel pain; like my days up to now. If the memories of the days I was violated by those people became wounds...

..... I remember again their laughter and their scary faces. All those times I was violated and threatened. When that guy with the knife jumped on me, my stomach felt hot and the clothes around my stomach area were cut. When I thought I was going to get stabbed, I became violent. After I was done with them, I realized that the heat in my stomach was pain. My heart shrinks once more. "I won't forgive them." Those words repeat in my head over and over.

"Guh....."

My knee wobbles. It comes again. My stomach is burning. It feels like an invisible hand is clutching at my insides.

I feel like vomiting. ..... I do not feel that way normally. I feel dizzy. ..... I abruptly lose consciousness in this situation normally. My arm is numb. ..... I confirm it is there by looking at it normally. It really hurts. ..... Yes, I feel alive.

The place I was stabbed is starting to hurt. The pain of the already-healed wound breaks out unexpectedly like this. A long time ago, mother said that wounds will not hurt once

they heal. But that is a lie. The wound made by that knife is still hurting me even after the wound has healed.

... But mother, I like this pain. For me who has never felt that I was alive, there is nothing else that makes me feel more alive than this sensation. This remaining sense of pain is not an illusion.

"I have to look for him quickly."

I murmur under my ragged breath. I have to get my revenge. I have to kill the boy that got away. It is irritating, but if I don't do so, people will find out that I am a murderer. I don't want that since I finally have obtained the sense of pain. I want to keep on feeling the pleasure of being alive. I take this body, that hurts every time I move it, and start to walk toward their hangout place. I cry at the remaining sense of pain in my stomach. But right now, even that discomfort is lovely.

/3

After parting with Azaka, I return to my place. When night comes, I go out into town. There have been five people killed so far. Four of them were in that basement bar two days ago. According to Touko, another was at a construction site yesterday night. Aside from the four killed two days ago, I do not see any relation with the one killed last night; but I cannot say it is a total stranger. Mikiya once said those that hang around at night have many connections. Maybe there is a high probability that the four, and the one killed last night are connected.

"That girl..."

I suddenly recall the girl that was with Azaka. ..... That aura of death creeping out of her like capillaries. Since I am not used to my eyes yet, I saw it without any prior preparation. ... That was abnormal. It might be more abnormal than me. But that girl was normal. She smelled of blood, and she had eyes like mine that made her seem unaware of which boundary she was standing on. She must surely be my prey, but I still cannot be confident in myself. That girl has no cause. She has no reason to kill for pleasure like I do, no darkness that takes pleasure in murder.

Take pleasure in murder... What would Kokutou Mikiya think if he were to hear that? Would he scold me, telling me that murder is bad?

"Idiot."

I do not really know whether that word is directed at him or me. Kokutou Mikiya said I have not changed from before. I guess I am no different from before I went into that coma. Then, did I always take walks at night? ... Was I always this abnormal person, searching for someone to kill?

"....."

No, that's wrong. Shiki did not have such taste. She did, but it was not prioritized. Then this is SHIKI's sensibility. That of the man, Ryougi SHIKI - the yin; inside the woman, Ryougi Shiki - the yang. I dwell on my conclusion. I used to have him inside of me, but he is not there anymore. Not being there must mean that he is dead. Then..... this desire to kill can only be mine. As Touko said, this job is just for me; because I am certainly happy about being able to kill someone.

..... It's almost midnight. I take the train and arrive at a station I rarely visit. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.

◇

After I part with Azaka, I change my destination. I do not know where the last one would run to, but I think there is a way to search for him. The only ones directly involved with me were the four that I killed and the one that escaped, but I was taken to many places by them. If I go there and ask where the last one went, I should be able to find where he escaped to. Since they cannot trust the police or the school, the only ones they can depend on should be their kind. I hold my burning stomach as I walk through the night town. I had some hesitations about going into indecent places, but they are now trivial to me as I am tormented by the pain and my memories of being violated.

At the third place I visit, I meet a guy that says he is a friend of Minato Keita. He is working at a big building converted into a karaoke club and gives me an unpleasant smile as he agrees to talk with me for a while. He sneaks out of his work and starts to walk, telling me we should go to a quiet place to talk. ... From the long experience I had, I can tell this man is taking me to their hangout place. These people can sniff out the weak. This person with the good, false smile must have seen through me as an easy victim to violate. ... He probably knows I was violated by Minato Keita's group too. That is why he takes me without any concern. Even though I know that, I still did not refuse to follow him. This man that is a few years older than me heads to a quieter area. I hold my stomach as it starts to hurt even more, and I prepare myself.

..... The time is almost midnight. I walk with this man as I curse the repeated violations in my head. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.

◇

The man can feel his good fortune. He knows from Keita’s boasting that his group was playing around with this girl from an all-girls school. It was Keita's habit to do as he wanted to that girl and then brag about it; but this man has nothing to do with it. He does not have any strong connections with Keita's group, and they are from different areas. That's why he always listened to Keita's story without concern. But for that girl to actually come to him!

You have to take what is given to you. The man decides to get out of work and take Fujino somewhere. ... It's not that the man is hungry for sex. It's not an unusual event for people like him to rape a girl with four or five other guys. There is a reason why this man does not call for his friends. It is because Fujino is the daughter of Asagami Construction’s president. He should be able to get lots of money if he violates her and threatens to make the matter public. The group Keita is in is rather stupid when it comes to such matters. Maybe because their leader is not that smart. Or is it that they did not need money because they were

smart? Well, it does not matter. Either way, the man is happy right now. He does not contact his friends because he thinks that he will get the largest payout if he does not share it.

Asagami Fujino, the girl who came to ask about Minato Keita, is following him silently. It would be bad to take her to the usual hangout place. The man heads to the warehouse area of the port. Since it's almost midnight, the warehouse area is empty. As all warehouses are made the same way and arranged the same way, it seems like a giant factory. There aren't many streetlights and nobody should come if he were to go in between the warehouses. The only things that will be irritating will be the sound of waves, and the lights from Broad Bridge currently under construction on the other side of the water. Bringing Fujino into this darkness, the man finally opens his mouth.

"This should be fine. So, what did you want to ask about?"

The man decides to answer her question first. It is his intuition that it's not smart to attack from the start.

"Yes, would you happen to know where Keita-san is?"

Fujino is looking down while holding her stomach. Her cleanly-cut hair hangs down in front of her, and the man cannot see her face.

"I haven't seen him lately. He doesn't even have his own place so he's been going around people's places. You won't be able to contact him either, 'cause he doesn't have a cell phone."

"No..... I can contact him."

"Huh?"

This girl's words are strange. She can contact him but doesn't know where he is? Has this girl gone crazy from being raped so much? Well, if that's the case, it should make things easier, but it's also true that the man is somewhat disappointed. He calms down again.

"All right. If you can contact him, then just ask where he is."

"Well..... Keita-san does not want to tell me where he is hiding. That is why I am going around asking his friends. Please answer me... I do not care if you know or do not know."

"Whoa, wait a sec. What do you mean he's hiding? Did he get into some deep shit?"

The man gets irritated by the girl’s strange words. He's hiding... does that mean that the cops know about them raping Fujino? No, if that was the case, she wouldn't come herself. The man thinks, but cannot come up with an answer, because... ... Because he has not seen the news.

"Well, who cares. But what do you mean you don't care if I know or not? Was that your intention to begin with? Keita's not who you’re after, but you came to find a new man or something?!"

The man laughs from his heart this time - "I really am in luck, I should be able to get the money without even making any threats." And besides, Asagami Fujino is a beautiful girl that he would not be able to easily obtain otherwise. A prize of money and beauty. What else can you call this but luck?

"Sorry, I should have taken you to my place from the start, then. Or do you like this kinda place better, perhaps?"

The girl in the black uniform nods.

"But before that, please tell me if you know where Keita-san is."

"Hey, dumbass, you can quit your excuse for coming here. First of all, I wouldn't know where he would go."

The girl looks up with a satisfied expression. The eyes looking at the man are abnormal. There is no emotion in those amber eyes that glow, and spiral.

..... It is not normal....

"......?"

The man, oblivious to those eyes, encounters something strange. His arm is moving on its own! His joint bends. His elbow stretches to about 90 degrees, and keeps bending... ... And finally, breaks.

"W-what.....!?"

A stupid scream. The fate of the man ends here. Certainly, he did have luck. Bad luck is luck indeed.

In a dark alley not even lit up by the moonlight, a tragedy raises its curtains.

◇

"........!!"

The scream only becomes a beast-like groan. The man's arms are no longer recognizable as arms. A puzzle ring... or a rubber band twisted around to make a model airplane fly. ... Either way, they cannot function as human arms anymore.

"H-h-help...!"

The man runs away from the girl, who is just standing in front of him. In that instant, his body is lifted off the ground and his right leg is torn away at the knee. Blood splashes as if emptying it from a full bucket. The blood that sprays along the wall seems like some sort of painting. Asagami Fujino keeps watching with her emotionless eyes.

"I-i-it's twi... twist-t-t-t-t-ed...!!!"

His words are incomprehensible. Fujino decides to ignore them.

..... She murmurs, "Bend."

That is the same word she has been saying all this time. Her friend has told her that a repeated word can become a curse. The man is on the ground, only moving his neck. Both his hands are twisted and his right leg is gone. The blood from his leg is soaking the ground. Fujino steps into it. A red carpet. Her shoes sink into the red liquid. The summer night is hot and the humid air sticks to her skin and becomes annoying. The blood in the air had a similar feeling.

"..... *Sigh*"

As she looks down at the man squirming like a green caterpillar, Fujino sighs. She hates herself for doing such a thing; but she also thinks this is what she intended to do from the start. She knew from the way he acted that this man did not know what happened in that basement bar. But he would find out in time. Then, he would grow suspicious of Fujino for searching Keita. So this is something that cannot be helped. This man intended to do that from the start. It is indirect, but this is part of Asagami Fujino's revenge. A revenge to those who violated her.

But her ability to violate far surpasses their ability to violate.

"I am sorry.... but I have to do this."

The man's remaining left leg is ripped away, causing the last of the life remaining in him to be cut off as well. Fujino looks down at the convulsing body. Right now she knows how the man feels. Until now, she did not know. She could not understand people's reaction to pain. But now that she knows pain, she can strongly sympathize with this man. That makes her happy. To be alive means to be hurt.

"And finally... I can be normal."

My pain, others' pain. I am the one who made him this way. I am the one that gave him these wounds. It means Asagami Fujino is superior. This is what it means to be alive, having this ugly self that cannot feel the pleasure of life unless committing such atrocities.

"..... Mother. Am I so ugly that I have to go this far?"

The thing in her stomach becomes unbearable. Her heart starts to beat rapidly. A chill runs up her spine...

"I do not want to kill people..."

"You're wrong."

Fujino turns around to the sudden voice. At the entrance of the alley between the warehouses, a girl in a kimono stands, with the port reflecting the quiet moonlight behind her...

... Ryougi Shiki is there...

"Shiki..... san?"

"Asagami Fujino... I see, you must have a connection with the Asagami God."

With a light footstep, Shiki takes a step forward. Shiki narrows her eyes at the smell of blood. Not in detest, but in happiness.

"Since when...."

Fujino stops her question. The answer is obvious.

"All this time. I followed you since you brought that piece of meat out here."

Fujino feels a chill at her cold voice. Shiki has seen it all. She saw it, but she still came out. She saw it, but did not stop it. She knew this was going to happen, but just watched...

..... This person is abnormal.....

"Please do not say "piece of meat". This is a person. This is a human corpse."

Fujino argues so in spite of what she is thinking about. She feels that Shiki is saying too much to call that man a piece of meat. Shiki nods.

"Yeah, a human is still a human even when it's dead. It doesn't become a piece of meat just by dying. But that's not a human death, is it? Humans don't die that way."

Shiki takes another step forward.

"A human who did not end his life like a human is not human anymore. Even if the people you've killed are left with their head intact or their body unwounded, you can't think of it as being normal. Those removed from the boundary are deprived of all their meaning. That's why that thing is just a piece of meat."

Suddenly, Fujino feels repulsion towards this person. Shiki is saying that she and the corpse are out of the ordinary, just like Ryougi Shiki, who is watching this tragedy right now without a change of expression.

"..... No. I am sane. I am not like you!'

Fujino screams out for no reason. Shiki laughs, like it is truly funny.

"We are alike, Asagami."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Fujino stares at Shiki. The vision in her eyes starts to distort. ... The "power" she had as a child comes into effect.

But the power suddenly fades away.

"........!?"

But the surprise is for both Shiki and Fujino. Asagami Fujino is surprised at her disappeared power. Ryougi Shiki is surprised at the suddenly-changed Asagami Fujino.

"Again...? What the hell is up with you?"

Shiki gets angry. She scratches her head like everything is ruined.

"I would have killed you if you stayed that way. You were like that too at the cafe. ... Fine. You let me down. I don't care about you now."

Saying that, Shiki turns and walks away. The sound of her footsteps gets farther away.

"Go home. If you do so, we shouldn't see each other again."

Then her figure disappears. Fujino stands still in the pool of blood.

..... I'm back to my previous self. I feel nothing again.

Fujino looks down at the man once more. There is no remnant of the feeling that was in her before. Only the sense of guilt enters her brain. What remains are the words Shiki left. Those words saying that Fujino and Shiki are both alike, both killers.

"No..... I am not like you."

Fujino murmurs as if crying. Truthfully, Fujino hates murder. She starts to tremble at the thought that she would have to continue such an act in order to find Minato Keita. Because killing people would be unforgivable. Those are her true emotions.

... The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Sense of Pain／Stay Behind

3

In the early morning on July 23, I finally get to Minato Keita's place. From the information from his friends, his average radius of action, and his way of thinking, I was finally able to narrow down his hiding place after a whole day. In one of the mansions located far from the residential district... he is trespassing and staying in a room on the sixth floor. I ring the doorbell and call out in a semi-loud voice.

"Keita-kun. I came to help you on request from your Senpai. I'm coming in."

The door is not locked so I enter quietly. There is no light on inside the room and it's dark, even though it is morning. I walk through the wooden hallway and reach the living room. From the empty living room, you can see the kitchen and the bedroom.

"You're in the back, right? I'm coming in."

There is another room beside the bedroom. I open the door and find that it's pitch black inside, as all of the curtains are drawn. A small scream comes out when I open the door. ... Like I thought, there's nothing in the room. A room without furniture is just like a box, there is no sign of life. In this room is a boy who looks to be about 16, trash from food, and a cell phone.

"You are Minato Keita-kun, right? It's unhealthy for you to stay in here. And it's wrong to use this room even when nobody is using it. This could be treated as burglary, you know?"

When I enter the room, Keita backs up against the wall. ... His face is terribly thin and worn-out. It's only been three days since that incident but his cheeks are hollow and his eyes are red. It's obvious he has not slept. I heard that he was doing drugs, but that was wrong. He is going insane without the help of drugs. ... He just doesn't want to face reality after seeing such a tragic scene. He is barely maintaining his sanity by staying in this dark room. It's a really dangerous way for him to defend himself, but it might be useful at least for a few days. I let out a sigh of relief in my head since I made it in time.

"..... Who are you?"

There is still a bit of sensibility left in his voice. I stop. He is still confused after facing such a tragedy. He might be scared of the killer, so who knows what he would do if I were to get closer. Doubt will make him think I am his enemy. But... it should be different if we can talk. If we talk, his intelligence should return. I decide to stand and talk instead of trying to calm him down from close by.

"Who are you?"

I raise both my hands at his question.

"I'm a friend of Gakuto. I am a Senpai too. I'm Kokutou Mikiya, do you remember me?"

"Kokuto..... Senpai?"

I must have been an unexpected visitor for him. He stands dumbfounded for a second and then starts to cry.

"Senpai. Why would you come for me?"

"I came to protect you since Gakuto came and asked me. We're worried that you're in some kind of trouble."

I ask him if I can come closer Keita shakes his head violently.

"I'm not going out of here. I'll be killed if I do."

"You'll be killed if you stay in here too."

Keita's eyes widen. He glares at me with enmity. I take a cigarette out and light it. ... I don't smoke but it's a useful gesture to make you seem relaxed and help the other person calm down.

"I heard about it. You know the killer, right Keita-kun?"

I ask him while exhaling smoke, but he still stays quiet.

"Then I'll just talk to myself for a while. On the night of the 20th, you guys were at your hangout place, the Shinkirou Bar. It was raining that night. I also happened to be out drinking that night, but I guess that doesn't matter. I've heard a lot of stories since Gakuto asked me to look for you. I think I know what you guys were doing on the night of the incident. I don't think the cops know about it yet. Those people prefer not to help the cops."

I shrug saying it’s troublesome. Keita is showing a different kind of fear now. It's not fear of what is going to happen, but fear of his doings being found out.

"On the night of the incident, there was one other person beside you guys. The high school girl you guys were threatening. I don't know her name but someone saw her going down to the bar. That girl has not showed up at the police station, or anywhere for that matter, since that incident. But it's not like her corpse was found like the other four. Do you know what happened to her?"

"I don't know... I don't know such a person."

"Then that would make you the killer. I'll go call the police."

"Wait, I didn't do that...! There's no way I could do such a thing..."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. So the girl was really there?"

After a brief silence, Keita nods.

"But that brings another question. That incident is not something a girl can accomplish by herself. Were you guys drugged?"

The boy shakes his head. Not to the question that the girl is the killer, but to the question of whether they were insane or not.

"It's impossible for five guys to be taken out by just one girl."

"But that's the truth...! I thought she was weird from the start, but she was mad! Monster... she was a monster!"

He starts to tremble and covers his face with his hands. I guess he is recalling the incident.

"She was just standing there and everyone started to twist up. I heard their bones breaking and I didn't know what the hell was going on. ... After she killed two of us, I knew Fujino wasn't normal; I knew that I'd be killed if I stayed there!"

Keita's words are certainly abnormal. He is saying that the girl - the one called Fujino - tore off everyone's limbs just by standing there and staring at them. I don't know why he thinks so, but I guess Keita felt it immediately ... the difference between the one doing the killing and the ones getting killed. But... she bends things just by looking at them? I can't quite believe it but I take the fact in. What can I deny after knowing Shiki, the one with killer eyes, and Touko-san, the magus? Well, leaving that aside, there's one word that caught my attention.

"All right. I'll believe that this Fujino girl did it."

"..... Huh?"

Keita raises his head in surprise.

"But... that's a lie. No one would believe such a story! Please, tell me you're lying!"

"Then let's just assume it's a trick, or should I say, "hypnosis" or something? Either way, don't think too hard about it. Don't try to accept what you really don't understand. But... what do you mean she was weird from the start?"

It seems Keita is regaining his sanity. The tension in him starts to fade away.

"It's just she's... weird. It seems like she's acting out everything, like her reactions are always late. She won't change her expression even when Leader threatens her. She won't change even when she's drugged and she won't even show pain when being punched."

"..... I see."

I knew they were violating Fujino but when he comes out and says that, I'm speechless. That girl called Fujino was violated by them for half a year and killed them as revenge. Is there justice in that, or do "what's just" and "what's lawful" contradict each other in this situation? Well, I don't want to think about it right now.

"So she looked great, but it wasn't fun doing her. It felt like doing a doll. Oh yeah, but that time was different. It's recent but there was this messed up guy in our group. He found her fun because she wouldn't change her expression no matter how much he punched her, so he finally brought out a bat and smacked her across her back. He was like "WHACK!" and

smacked away. She did make a painful face. I felt a bit relieved 'cause I knew she was feeling pain too. I remember it 'cause she was human that night."

"You, shut up for a while."

Keita shuts his mouth. I don't think I can keep my composure if I hear any more of this.

"I get the situation. I know someone in the police so we can go there. That's about the second safest place I know."

I approach him to make him stand up, but Keita jumps back.

"No, I won't go to the cops. Besides... I'll be killed if I go out. I'd rather stay here if I'm going to be torn to pieces!"

"Killed if you go out...?"

It's worded a bit strangely. It seems there's still one big misunderstanding between us. ... I can understand him saying that he'll be found if he goes out. But it's strange for him to skip that and say he's going to be killed. That's like he's being... watched. Then I finally realize what the cell phone by his feet means.

"..... You're getting calls from Asagami Fujino."

Keita starts to tremble once again at those words.

"Does she know of this place yet?"

The boy answers that he doesn't know.

"I had Leader's cell phone when I ran away. She called me after everyone was killed. She said she's going to look for me no matter what! So I have to hide!"

"Why do you still have that cell phone?"

I know the answer but I still ask.

"Because she says she's going to kill me if I get rid of it! She says I should hang on to it if I don't wanna die! She says she's gonna let me go as long as I have this!"

..... How callous... Her curse is so strong.

"But she still calls me every night. ... She's insane. She saw Shono two days ago, Kouhei yesterday... she said she killed them because they didn't know where I was. And she said kindly that it was good for me! She tells me I should go see her if I don't want my friends killed... no way I can do that!!"

... What kind of fear would that be? The phone calls he receives every night are messages from the one trying to kill him.

... I could not find you today.

One of your friends died in your place.

Come see me if you don't want them killed. You don't have to come, but these murders will continue...

... and I will eventually find you...

"What should I do? I don't wanna die. I don't want to die like that! They were crying in pain! They were coughing up blood and their necks were twisted like nothing!"

"Let's get rid of that phone. Or there will be more victims."

"Don't you get it!? I'm saying I'll be killed if I do that!"

Two innocent people were killed because of that. Asagami Fujino had to commit two meaningless murders because of that.

"You'll be killed anyway if you stay like this."

I push my cigarette into the ground and start to walk towards him. I forcefully pull on his arm.

"Senpai, please don't do this. I can't do anything now. Please leave me alone... leave me alone..... no, really, I'm scared. I don't wanna be by myself anymore. Please help me...!"

I nod.

"I'll help you. I won't go to the cops. I'll take you to the safest place I know."

The only place that will be able to take him in will be Touko-san's place. Believing that is the best option, I leave the mansion with Keita.

4

I tell Touko-san about the situation, and have her protect Keita. She leaves the boy, who hasn't slept since the night of the incident, on her sofa and comes back into the office where Shiki and I are waiting. Touko-san sits on her chair and Shiki is leaning up against the wall. I am sitting on the sofa directly in front of Touko-san. Finally calming down after Keita falls asleep, they both tell me that I am too good-natured. I take their words of criticism with a sullen face.

"I knew you guys were going to make fun of me like that."

"If you knew, you shouldn't have involved yourself in this mess. You're easily taken advantage of by those kinds of guys."

"It can't be helped. The situation was special."

Touko-san ponders my response. She is using offensive words, but she did agree to take Keita in for protection. Shiki, however, is against it. She might be really mad, as she is glaring at me wordlessly.

"Special, huh? I do admit this is an abnormal case, but what are you going to do now? Are you thinking about looking for her and persuading her?"

"..... That’s what I was thinking. We can't have him here forever and Asagami Fujino might continue killing people. I think I can only go see her and talk to her."

"You idiot. That's why we say you're too good-natured."

Shiki holds nothing back. She never does, but she is rather offensive today. She really is mad.

"You won't be able to talk to her, it's too late. She won't stop until she accomplishes her goal. No, I don't even know if she'll stop then. Her means and intention are reversed."

"Shiki, you sound like you know her."

"I know her, and I've met her too. She was there with Azaka yesterday."

I'm surprised. I wonder why Azaka would be with Asagami Fujino. They are totally unrelat--.... I guess not. I only heard that she is a high schooler, but it's a different story if she is from Reien Ladies Academy.

"You're pretty slow, Kokutou. You haven't investigated Asagami Fujino yet?"

"Hey now, I only heard her name for the first time two hours ago. My role was to protect Minato Keita, so I didn't have time to do anything like that."

... But I have a bad feeling about this. It's not that I'm worried that Azaka might be involved... it feels more like the impatience you feel when you are forced to think about something you've been avoiding.

"... Then is Asagami Fujino still going to school?"

"No, she hasn't been home or back at the dorms since the night of the incident. She's been skipping school too: she has completely disappeared. Azaka said she hasn't seen her since yesterday."

"Touko-san, when did you research this?"

"Just a while ago. I received a search request from her parents. I heard Azaka was with Asagami Fujino yesterday from Shiki but it seems Azaka didn't notice anything wrong with her friend."

What irony, if my promise with Azaka was a day later or if I had found Keita faster, yesterday's victim might not have been killed.

"So the protection of Minato Keita is not meaningless to us. If we cannot find her, we can use him as bait. It'll get rough from there so you and Keita should stay here."

With that, I finally understand... the reason why Shiki is here.

"Rough.....? What are you going to do with Asagami Fujino?"

"Depending on the circumstances, we'll probably have to resort to combat. First of all, even the client wishes it. He doesn't want his daughter reported as a killer. He told us to get rid of her before it all goes public."

"What? It's not like she's committing meaningless murders...! I think a discussion is possible."

"That's impossible. You haven't heard the whole truth. You don't know the final blow she took when she killed them. I made Keita confess when I put him to sleep. I heard that his leader attacked Fujino on the last night with a knife. It seems she was stabbed. That's what triggered her revenge."

... Knife... so she was threatened with a knife even after being violated? So why would that be the reason she's beyond help?

"The problem is right there. She was stabbed in her stomach on the night of the 20th. Shiki saw her two days later. At that time, she had no wound... she was completely healed."

"Stabbed in the stomach....."

Hold on. Don't think anymore. My mind tries to stop me but fails. On the night of 20th, student of the Reien Academy, stabbed in the stomach.....

"I heard it from Keita, but she says on the phone that she cannot forget because the wound keeps on hurting. The wound that healed starts to hurt. Probably, whenever she has a flashback of the times when she was violated, the pain of being stabbed returns. The horrible memory brings back the terrible pain. I believe the pain is an illusion, but it must be real for her. This is no different than a fit. Every time Asagami Fujino has a flashback of the pain that doesn't even exist, she kills. Who can be sure that won't happen while you're talking with her?"

But that means we can talk to her if she doesn't feel the pain. But before I can say so, Shiki speaks out.

"That's wrong, Touko. She really feels pain. It's still in her body."

"That can't be. Then, Shiki, is it your mistake that her wound is completely healed?"

"Her stab wound is healed. There's nothing like a piece of metal in her. Her pain really did appear and disappear. It's already too late when she's in pain, but when she's not, she's too boring. I told you that I came back 'cause she wasn't even worth killing."

"Well, she would be already dead if a fragment of metal were still inside her... but a wound that still hurts after it's healed, huh?"

Touko-san takes out a cigarette as if saying she doesn't understand. I too can only wonder at Shiki's words. It's normal to be in pain until the wound heals. But why would the pain of a wound that's already healed come back from time to time? That's like having only the sense of pain remaining in your body.

"... Oh."

And it hits me. It's not an answer to her unknown symptoms, but I am able to understand why Keita called her weird.

"Kokutou, is that some new way of staying healthy by saying vowels out loud?"

... I don't think anyone would do such a thing, even if it existed.

"No, about Asagami Fujino being weird."

Touko-san raises her brow. Oh, I only told her the summary of the story, so I guess I haven't told her about this yet. I tell her about the strange condition of Fujino.

"Isn't something strange? It was in the conversation with Minato Keita, but it seems she was unaffected by anything they did to her. I thought she was a strong girl at first, but I was wrong. She isn't that resolute of a person."

"..... You sound like you know her, Mikiya."

Shiki glares at me. My instincts tell me to ignore her. ... I might be digging myself a hole if I didn't.

"It's possible... I don't know that much about it, but I think she might have something like Paresthesia, or pain insensitivity."

Pain insensitivity is just as it sounds, a disorder where one cannot feel any pain. It's a very rare condition, so you never encounter it, but if that happens to be the case, her strange symptoms might be possible.

"I see. Then that can explain some things, but there should be a reason. Even if she did get stabbed, if she is pain insensitive, there wouldn't be any pain to start out with. You also need to check if she was born with it and you also have to know if her nerves are dissociated. Well, assuming that she is pain insensitive, is there anything that might cause this insensitivity to malfunction, like hitting her back hard or taking lots of steroids?"

Hitting her back hard... it must be that.

"I don't know how hard, but I heard they hit her in the back with a bat."

I say this as unemotionally as possible. Touko-san just laughs.

"I see. As it's them, they probably took a full swing. Her backbone might have been broken. Even a small fracture is considered a broken bone. And she was still violated even after her backbone was broken, not knowing what that feeling is. Geez, that's the first pain she feels, huh? She must not have understood what her irritation was. Wow, I'm surprised you decided to protect Minato Keita."

Touko-san says so, grinning. She has this bad habit of cornering someone with her words. I guess she likes to attack people mentally, and it usually ends up being me. I usually fight back, but I cannot answer right now. ... I don't have the confidence to. All I could do is look down and reject her response.

"... So, Touko-san, are the backbone and pain insensitivity related somehow?"

"Yeah, your spine controls your nerves, right? When you have a problem with your sense of pain, you usually have something wrong in your spine. Do you know of Syringomyelia?"

... I would not know of such a technical medical term. Touko-san lowers her shoulders in disappointment when I shake my head.

"Syringomyelia is the most common case of pain insensitivity. Listen, Kokuto, there are two types of sense: *Superficial sensation* that lets you feel such things as pain, temperature and touch, and *deep sensation* that tells you of your body movements and general area. Normally, these two senses work at the same time. Do you know what it means to have no senses at all?"

"I can put it in words. You don't feel anything that you touch, and you don't taste anything that you eat, right?"

Touko-san nods with a smile.

"That's a natural response of a person with senses. You think they don't have senses but have a body, so they are like you. But that's wrong. To have no sense means that you cannot gain anything, Kokutou."

Cannot gain anything...? No way. They should still be able to hold things and talk to others. Then that would only mean that they cannot feel what they are touching. Why would that

lead to not being able to gain anything? It's not like they don't have their body. I think it's better than someone missing a part of their body or something.

Then I realize. ..... No body. Even when they touch, they cannot feel that they are touching. They just look at it and confirm that they are "touching". That is the same as reading a book. What's so different about it from reading a book or imagining a story? Even when they walk, they are only moving their body. They do not feel the ground, but only feel their feet moving. No, even that feeling is barely confirmed by looking at their own feet. To have no sense means not having a body. That would make them no different from ghosts. For them, all reality is what they see through their eyes. That's the same as not being able to touch anything even if they really can touch...!

"So that's pain insensitivity, huh?"

... That night, I met a girl who was uncertain about reality.

"That's right. Let's assume Asagami Fujino's pain insensitivity temporarily went away from being hit in her back. Then that would mean she knows what pain feels like. That sense she has never felt before must be her impulse for murder."

Would that girl, who found out what pain feels like, hate such a sensation? No, it would be impossible for her to think so. ... Since she is like a ghost, I can only imagine how happy she must have been when she felt the sensation of pain. She would not have understood the feeling of happiness either, though.

"... Maybe the pain insensitivity went away temporarily, and her experiencing pain might have caused her to figure out the emotion of hate. The feeling of pain she finally obtained triggered her revenge..."

... What irony.

"That's the question. Fujino said that she is taking revenge because her wound is hurting, but I have to wonder. To be more accurate, her pain makes her recall the violations done to her, which makes her want to take revenge. I think this is how it is but it just doesn't feel right. First of all, according to Shiki, she's back to pain insensitivity, right? Then that would take away her reason for revenge. Her wound should not hurt, since it's healed."

"That's wrong, Touko-san. To have no feelings must mean she cannot experience sexual stimulation either, so she could not feel anything even when they raped her. To her, it only means that her body was raped. But... no, because of that, instead of her body hurting, her heart was taking the pain. I think her wounds are not on her body but rather in her soul. That's why the pain comes back with the memory, because her heart is in pain."

Touko-san does not answer. In her place, Shiki starts to laugh.

"That's impossible. There's no such thing as a soul . How can something that's not there hurt?"

I can't think of any comebacks to what she says. Surely, something sentimental, such as a soul, is not something you can prove to exist. When I am just standing there silently, Touko-san disagrees with Shiki.

"But people's hearts, their minds, are easily broken. I don't think you can conclude that it can't be hurt just because it has no form. In reality, some people die because they are hurt

mentally. No matter how poor of an illusion it is, as long as it is true for the person, the illusion can be called "pain"."

That's a rather ambiguous answer for her. But now, I have someone on my side. Shiki gets angry.

"What, Touko, are you siding with Asagami Fujino too? She's not like that."

"Yeah, I feel the same way with respect to that. I don't think Asagami Fujino would be that sentimental. She takes revenge because her heart hurts? I don't think so. Because, if you're pain insensitive, even your heart won't feel pain."

She instantly sides against me.

"Look, personality is medically defined as "a phenomenon by which a person reacts to outside force". A person's emotions... such things as "kindness" and "hate" cannot just come from within. They would not function unless something from outside stimulates them. That's why there is pain. To not have pain means this cannot happen. People with pain insensitivity lack personality. They do not think like you or have tastes similar to us. They do not understand common sense. That's why talking with her is meaningless."

She casually tells me the conclusion of the suggestion of talking to her. Her indifference seems rather like a last warning and puts me on the edge.

"... Please don't say that when you haven't even met her."

I stand up from the sofa, not being able to take it any longer.

"That's all under the assumption that Asagami Fujino has been pain insensitive since she was born. This might not be the case."

"You're the one who said she might be pain insensitive."

She says so coldly. ... This person really does not care about others. How can she be so cold to Asagami Fujino when she's a woman? Or is it that she can be this cold *because* she is a woman?

"Well, I do have things that I'm concerned about too. Asagami Fujino might be just a victim. The question is which was first."

... What does she mean by "which was first"? Touko-san starts to ponder and does not explain anymore.

"What do you think, Shiki?"

I ask her without turning around. Shiki answers exactly as I expected.

"Same as Touko. But I can't allow Asagami Fujino to continue, regardless of what Touko thinks. I feel sick just from thinking that she might commit another murder."

"Hate towards those similar to you, huh? It does seem true that your kind doesn't like to form groups."

Touko-san hears Shiki's words. I know why Shiki said so. ... When will Shiki realize herself that she really does not like murder? Asagami Fujino and Ryougi Shiki, I do think the two are alike. Since they are similar, they cannot ignore the crucial difference. If the two did end up in combat... would Shiki realize her true feelings? No, I can't let them fight.

"..... I understand. I'll look into her information my way. Can I see any data on her if you have any?"

Touko-san hands it to me. Shiki looks away telling me to do as I please. Looking at the information, Asagami Fujino lived in Nagano until elementary school. Her surname there was not Asagami as in "Shallow Top" but Asagami as in "Shallow God". Her father right now is not her real father, meaning that she followed her mother when she remarried. I guess this would be the place to start my investigation.

"I have to travel quite a long way. I may not come back today or tomorrow. Oh, and Touko-san, is there really any such thing as supernatural power?"

"You don't believe what Minato Keita said? Asagami Fujino surely has some sort of power to that effect. That, the term "supernatural power", is too broad, so it's not really that accurate. If you want to know about it, I can introduce you to a specialist."

Saying that, Touko-san writes the address of this supernatural power specialist on the back of her business card.

"Wait, you don't know much about it?"

"Of course not. Magic is a study. How can we associate ourselves with something inherent without history or theory violating the rule? Those kinds of powers only given to the chosen ones are what I hate the most."

She really must hate it, as she sounds like she has her glasses on. I take her business card and then speak to Shiki.

"Shiki, I'm going, but make sure you don't push yourself."

"You're the one pushing yourself. I guess it really is true that stupidity can't be fixed."

Shiki uses these offensive words, but then nods, saying she'll try. I leave the office with relief. It's all right, I've never died, but I was almost killed once. I haven't told her that the one who almost killed me was Shiki herself. She forgot about that incident after she recovered from her coma - it's fine if she does not remember.

I will probably never tell her about it.

/4

July 24th. It has been one day since Kokutou Mikiya went to investigate Asagami Fujino. Not much has happened in this time. The only significant events are a big hurricane coming later tonight up to tomorrow morning and a 17 year old driving without a license dying in a collision. At least, that's all that happened publicly. Ryougi Shiki is staring aimlessly outside from Aozaki Touko's office. The summer sky is so huge that one instantly gets weary of looking at it. In the cloudless sky lies the shining sun. It seems like a bad dream that this clear sky is going to be covered by storm clouds later tonight.

Clang! Clang!

The noise echoes. There is a metal factory beside this office. Since Shiki is beside the window, the noise assaults her ears endlessly. Shiki looks at Touko, who is making a phone call. She's wearing her glasses.

"Yes, that is right. About that accident. ... I see, so he was indeed dead before the collision. Is his cause of death strangulation? That isn't wrong. If the neck has been twisted, it is strangulation. It does not matter how strongly it was done. How have you people treated this, as an accident? A collision, I see... That would seem right. There was only the victim in the car. No detective can solve the mystery of a moving sealed room. No, that's all the information I wanted. Thank you very much. I will repay you for this somehow, Officer Akimi."

Touko sounds very formal and kind. It is so different from her usual tone, which causes people to shiver when they hear it. After hanging up the phone, Touko adjusts her glasses, to sit in front of those emotionless eyes.

"Shiki, the 7th victim appeared. This is more than the killer two years ago."

Shiki walks away from the window, slightly upset. She wanted to see the sky be taken over by dark clouds.

"I told you. It has to be a meaningless murder this time."

"It seems so. Minato Keita doesn't know this Takagi Shouichi guy who died in the accident. This murder has nothing to do with her revenge."

Shiki, who is wearing a white kimono, grits her teeth in anger. She puts on a red leather jacket.

"I see. Then I can't wait any longer. Touko, do you know where she is?"

"Nope. I can guess a few places where she might be hiding. If you're going to look for her, you'll just have to go look at all those places."

Touko takes out a few cards from her desk and throws them at Shiki, who grabs them swiftly.

"... These are... Asagami group's personal identification cards? Who is this Araya Souren guy?"

All three cards are entrance cards to the construction areas which the Asagami construction group is involved in. It must be a magnetic lock since there is a magnetic stripe on each card.

"That alias is the name of one of my acquaintances. I couldn't think of a random name. I used it when I had someone make these ID cards. Well, that doesn't matter. Asagami Fujino should be hiding in one of those places. It'll be troublesome, so finish this off before Kokutou gets back."

Shiki glares at Touko. Her usually hollow eyes sharpen. She directs a silent complaint to Touko but turns around without saying anything. She has the same opinion as Touko . Shiki does not hurry out, but leaves with her usual graceful steps. Now that she's alone, Touko looks outside the window.

"Looks like Kokutou didn't make it. Well, will a storm come first or will a *storm* come first? Shiki by herself might not make it out alive, Ryougi."

The magus murmurs to no one.

◇

Right after noon, the weather starts to change. The blue sky is now already covered with gray clouds. The wind is getting stronger too. Talk of a coming storm is exchanged between those walking around.

"Guh....."

I keep walking, holding my burning stomach. I didn't know about the storm. Probably because I was so caught up looking for someone. The town is rowdy but there are fewer and fewer people out on the streets. It looks like I won't be able to do it tonight. I think I should go back for today.

After many hours, I finally reach the port on foot. The sky is already dark even though it’s still seven in the summertime. A storm can even mess up the usual times of seasons. I move my body, whose reactions are beginning to lag more and more as time goes on, and reach the entrance of the bridge. This bridge is the bridge my father is working hardest on. A big bridge that connects this port and the port on the other side. The bridge is a four-laned road with many pathways beneath it. The underground is like a shopping mall. Even though it is floating on the ocean, I call it "underground" because it's under the bridge. There are guards on the upper part of the bridge, so I can't get in there; but the entrance to

the underground mall is unmanned and I can go inside if I have a card. I take out one of the cards that I took from my house and open the door.

... It's dark inside. Even though most of the interior design work is finished, there isn't any electricity running yet. The empty mall seems like a station about to close up for the day. Many different stores straddle the sides of the corridors that seem to stretch on forever. I walk for about 500 meters and end up in a parking lot. This place is still under construction and is really messy. The walls are unfinished and the bags to keep out the rain are making noise in the wind. ..... It's almost eight o'clock. The wind is strong. I want to plug my ears against the sound of the wind and the crashing of the waves. The sound of rain striking the walls is fiercer than the machine guns I see in movies.

"Rain....."

It was raining on that day too. After my first murder, I washed myself off in the rain. After that, I was able to meet that person. That person who I met only once in middle school and with whom I only talked for the briefest of moments.

... Yes, I remember. It was a time when the sun was setting. After an event at school, a Senpai from a different school talked to me, who was still on the field. I could not move because I had sprained my ankle. Since I am pain insensitive, I actually could move and even if I shouldn't move, it had no effect on me mentally. But my swollen ankle was telling me that it would get worse if I moved any more. All I could do was watch the sunset without feeling anything. At that time, I did not call for help. I did not want to call for help. If I did, everyone would tell me... "You endured quite a bit of pain." "Does it hurt?" "Doesn't it hurt?" "Don't you think it hurts?" I did not want that. That is why I was sitting down with a normal expression. I was being a bit stubborn not to let anyone notice. My mother, father, teacher, friends... nobody noticed. I had to let everyone think that Fujino was normal. At that time, somebody tapped me on my shoulder. I did not feel it but I heard a sound by my ear. When I turned around, that person was standing there. He looked kind, without knowing what I was thinking. I think my first impression of him was that I did not like him.

"Does it hurt?"

That person greeted me with unbelievable words. How did he know about the wound that nobody should know about? I shook my head. I was being stubborn not to admit it. He looked at the name tag on my gym uniform and said my name. He then felt my sore ankle and made a sour face. I knew he was going to say something I would not like, so I closed my eyes. I did not want to hear insensitive words from people with normal senses such as "does it hurt?" or "is the pain bad?"; but he said something completely different.

"You're stupid. Look, pain is not something you should bear. Pain is something you have to announce, Fujino-chan."

...That is what Senpai told me when I was in middle school. After that, Senpai carried me to the nurse's office and that was that. It was like a vague dream. Come to think of it, Asagami Fujino might have fallen in love with him at that time. That smile that worried about the suffering that nobody else noticed.....

Throb.

My stomach aches, rousing me from my dream. There is no way I can be dreaming when I'm covered in people's blood. But... the rain might wash away my impurity. I want to go up to the bridge. The storm is already here. It should be like a spilled bucket, out there on the bridge. I start to get excited. I drag my body, which now feels constant pain, and go up the slope in the parking lot.

Asagami Fujino goes up onto the bridge. To be soaked in the familiar summer rain.

◇

The big bridge has turned into a shallow lake. The four-lanes of asphalt are covered with rain water and it goes up to one's ankles. The smashing rain comes down at an angle and the wind is raging as if to knock the street lamps down. The sky is dark. The light of the port is far away and unreachable like watching the moon from the ground. Asagami Fujino comes out into this storm. The black uniform blends into the night. She walks soaked in rain, breathing out from her purple lips. When she reaches a street lamp, she meets Death.

"I finally found you, Asagami." In the sea of the storm, Ryougi Shiki stands dressed in a white kimono. The red leather jacket repels the rain. She is also soaked.

She looks like a ghost.

Shiki and Fujino both stand under the street lamp. There are about ten meters of ground between them. She finds it strange that they can see each other and hear each other through the driving rain, and the raging wind.

"Ryougi..... Shiki."

"You should have just gone back home like I told you. You're a beast that knows only the taste of blood. You enjoy murder."

"..... That is you. I do not enjoy murder."

Fujino, still breathing hard, stares at Shiki.

Hostility. Killing intent.

Fujino quietly covers her face with her left hand. ....Her eyes glare from between her fingers. As if to answer, Shiki raises a knife with her right hand. This is their third meeting. Shiki laughs, thinking of the idiom that "third time's the charm". This Asagami Fujino is more than sufficient to be her target.

"... I feel it. Yes, we are alike. Yeah..... I can kill you as you are now."

With those words, the two's restraints are completely removed.

/5

Shiki starts to run. Her speed is incredible, despite the pooling water and violent wind. It should not take more than three seconds to reduce the distance between them from ten meters to zero. Enough time to bring Fujino's frail body to the ground and stab her in her heart. But even that speed cannot match the speed of sight. Shiki has to close in on her target while Fujino only has to look at her target. For the two, that difference of three seconds is too long.

"....."

Fujino's eyes glimmer. The left eye for a rotation to the left. The right eye for a rotation to the right. Taking Shiki's head and left leg as the fulcrums, she twists. A strange sensation occurs instantaneously. The moment Shiki feels the invisible power upon her, she jumps explosively to one side. But the power on Shiki does not weaken. Fujino's power is not a projectile weapon. Even if one gets away from one round, it is impossible to get completely away from it whilst in her vision.

..... Damn.....!!

Shiki realizes Fujino's power is stronger than she thought. She runs. As if to escape from her vision, Shiki runs in a circle around Fujino.

"Do you think you can get awa-"

Fujino murmurs, but then is astonished. Shiki did get away! Unbelievably, Shiki has jumped off the bridge down to the ocean. The sound of a window being broken is heard. What athletic ability... Shiki went off the bridge and into the parking lot right underneath it.

"What a ridiculous person you are."

Shiki did get away. But Fujino saw Shiki's left arm until the end. She did see Shiki's leather jacket twist. Shiki's left arm cannot be used anymore. Fujino realizes...

"I am..... stronger."

The pain in her stomach gets worse by the second. Withstanding the pain, Fujino makes her way down. She has to settle her match with Ryougi Shiki now.

Darkness engulfs the parking lot. Visibility is bad, making it hard to walk. It feels like being in a miniature town. The metal poles and the stacks of materials are arranged like buildings. A few minutes after following Shiki down here, Fujino regrets choosing this place as the

battleground. Her ability has to have the target in her vision to set the fulcrum of the twist. Even if Fujino knows that Shiki is hiding behind a metal pole, if she cannot see Shiki, then only the pole can be twisted. In that slight instant on top of the bridge, Shiki understood Fujino's power. That is why she ran away, here, the place where she has a chance of winning. ...Fujino realizes how inferior she is at fighting. But still..... She is stronger in terms of power. If she cannot see, she'll just have to destroy everything blocking her view. Fujino takes every metallic pole that might get in her way and bends them. As she twists each one, the pain in her stomach gets worse and the shaking in the parking lot gets harder.

"You really are ridiculous."

Shiki's voice echoes through the darkness. Fujino turns in the direction of the sound. The stack of materials Shiki is hiding behind is instantly smashed. At that instant... a white figure streaks out of the wreckage

"... There!!"

Fujino's eyes get a hold on Shiki. The girl in the white kimono and the red leather jacket runs toward Fujino, holding her left arm out.

"......!!"

Fujino hesitates a bit and then *bends*. With a cracking sound, Shiki's left arm breaks. Her neck is next; but when Fujino looks... Shiki is already within range. The path that the knife takes is like a flash of light. A bright swing that leaves a lingering trace in the darkness. The knife that strikes without hesitation, however, does not hit Fujino. She ducks, avoiding the swing that was aimed at her neck... no, it was just an accident. Asagami Fujino only looked away because she was scared of Shiki, who was running towards her with a broken arm.

"Damn..."

Shiki readies her knife again. Fujino frantically stares at Shiki's body.

"... Go away...!"

Shiki's movement is faster than Fujino's scream. Shiki runs unhesitatingly into the darkness. One should be surprised not at her athletic ability, but at her quick thinking in choosing to escape.

"..... What a person....."

Fujino murmurs. Her rough breathing is not from the pain in her stomach. Fujino carefully checks the darkness around her. She does not know when Shiki will jump out of it again. Fujino feels her neck. There is a slight scratch from the last attack. A wound of about 4mm that isn't bleeding. ... It is not bleeding, but her breathing is hard.

"Why does she not stop, even when her arm is broken...?"

Fujino says so aloud, unable to contain the fear in that question. She cannot forget that moment. Those eyes of Shiki, who still came at her after having her arm broken. Shiki was having fun. That person is enjoying this situation where even I, the one with the advantage, am overwhelmed with tension. Maybe... for Ryougi Shiki, having her arm broken is not pain, but happiness. Fujino has not enjoyed murder so far. She does not want to kill. But that person is different. That person must like murder. The more extreme the situation is,

the happier she becomes. Fujino thinks... if Ryougi Shiki is a person that lacks any sense of feeling towards life itself, what will she do to substitute for that? For Fujino, it was murder. When she sees other humans die, she gets this indescribable feeling... Since Fujino found out what pain feels like, she is able to sympathize with others in pain. The reality that she is the one in control of others makes her feel that she really does exist. A "ruthless murder" is Fujino's substitute. She does not know it herself, but Fujino takes pleasure in murder. Then what is Ryougi Shiki's substitute.....?

◇

"That was bad"

Hiding behind a stack of debris, Shiki murmurs to herself. The arm had no power when it was twisted on the bridge. Since it was useless, she decided to use it as a shield and rely on one decisive strike; but the plan failed because of the fact that Fujino was more cowardly than Shiki thought she would be. Shiki takes off her jacket and cuts away the sleeve. She wraps the cloth around her left upper arm to staunch the bleeding. A crude treatment. There's no feeling in the arm that was twisted. It will probably never move. Shiki feels a chill at that fact.

"You're great, Asagami. You're the best...!"

She is losing blood quickly. She feels her consciousness slipping away.

...I'm hot-blooded anyway. If I lose some, it will just make me think more clearly...

Shiki concentrates. Asagami Fujino is a strong enemy that might be the best she'll ever meet. One mistake could cost her her life. That is pleasant, that makes Shiki feel that she is alive. For Shiki, normally bound by her past, only this moment is real. This sensation that she is able to feel only when putting her life in danger. That small life of hers that she can declare as her own. Kill or be killed. Since even her normal life is vague, Shiki can feel life only by such primal methods as this. If Asagami Fujino seeks pleasure in murder... Ryougi Shiki seeks the sensation of life by relating with murder. Fujino fears this situation.... and Shiki wishes for this situation. That is the difference between the hunter and the hunted. The difference between the two is definite now.

... Fujino's breathing echoes in the air. ... Roughly, strongly, painfully, as if in fear...

She is breathing hard, like Shiki, even though she has not been hurt yet. In the dark, they breathe in unison. Are their heartbeats, minds, and even their lives the same? The bridge swinging in the storm feels like a crib. Shiki, for the first time, feels some affection toward Fujino. So much that she feels she must take Fujino's life with her own hands.

"I know it's useless though....."

Shiki murmurs. She knew from the time she saw her at the cafe. She knows that the inside of Asagami Fujino is on the verge of breaking down. It's meaningless to finish off Fujino right now. But, that's life. Shiki thinks some things should come out of meaningless actions. She remembers Touko saying that humans are creatures that do meaningless things. Shiki feels the same way now. Exactly like this bridge. People decry one uselessness as stupidity

while praising another uselessness as art. Where does the boundary lie? Boundaries are uncertain. It is the person that establishes them, but it's always external influences that determine them. Then there is no such thing as a boundary to begin with. The world is full of empty boundaries. That is why there are no walls in society to separate the abnormal from the normal.

... The ones to make the wall are us. Like me wanting to get away from the world. Like the way Mikiya thinks I'm not abnormal. ... Like the way Asagami Fujino is running away to death...

In that sense, Shiki and Fujino are alike. They are similar. In this small space, two of the same kind are not needed.

"Let's go. I can see the trick to your magic show now."

After shaking her head clear of the effect of the blood loss, Shiki gets up. She grips her knife tightly in her right hand. If Fujino does not lay her own boundary... then she will just have to eliminate her.

Shiki slowly appears. Fujino cannot believe her eyes. Shiki comes out directly in front of her, and a long distance away, too. Fujino does not notice but her fever is over 39 degrees now. She does not realize that the pain in her stomach is from a "certain condition".

"... I see. ..... You must be abnormal."

Fujino can only think this. She looks at Shiki and *bends*. Her vision distorts. The fulcrums created on Shiki's head and leg each rotate in opposite directions and twist Shiki's body like a piece of carpet.

... It should have twisted her.

Shiki, whose left arm is bleeding, nullifies Fujino's "distortion" just by swinging the knife in her right hand. No..... she kills it.

"It's hard to see that without form, but you used your power too many times. Now I can finally see it. Your power is a spiral of red and green. It's really... beautiful."

Fujino does not understand what Shiki is saying. The only thing she realizes is that Shiki will surely kill her now. Fujino repeatedly prays.

Bend, bend, bend, bend!

As Fujino glares, Shiki swings her knife and eliminates the power. The pain in Fujino's stomach is about to go over its limit.

"Who..... are you?"

Shiki answers Fujino's fear with infinitely deep eyes.

"Everything in existence has an imperfection. Especially humans, but even in air, will, and time. It's natural to have an end if it has a beginning. My eyes can see the death of things. They're special, like yours."

Shiki looks at Fujino with those ominous eyes that Fujino felt before.

"That's why... if one exists, I could even kill a God."

Shiki runs. As gracefully as if she were walking. She approaches Fujino and pushes her down to the ground. Shiki straddles her. Fujino's throat trembles at facing Death so close to her.

"Are you... going to kill me?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Why are you going to kill me? I only killed because my wound was hurting."

Shiki laughs.

"That's a lie. Then why are you laughing? That time before, and even now. Why do you seem so happy?"

Fujino hesitates. She quietly places her hand over her mouth.

..... It's bent.

She did not know because she does not feel anything, but she is certainly smiling.....

My first murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

My second murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

I do not know why, but there was always an irritation. I was always irritated when I killed. Was that emotion... happiness? I could not feel anything even when I was raped, so I took pleasure in murder.....?

"In the end, you were enjoying it. You like hurting others. That's why that pain would never go away."

If the pain were to go away, Fujino would have no reason to kill. The wound will continue hurting, for the sake of Fujino herself.

"..... That is..... the answer?"

Fujino murmurs. She does not want to accept it. She does not want to think about it. She must be different to Shiki.....

"I told you, we are alike."

Shiki's knife moves. Fujino screams at the top of her lungs... For everything to *bend*.

The parking lot shakes. The ocean in the middle of the storm appears inside of Fujino's mind. Withstanding the burning in her brain, Fujino creates a fulcrum on either side of the bridge...

... And *bends*...

◇

BOOM!

A tumultuous roar, like the crash of lightning, is heard. The metal foundation creaks and screams. The ground tilts and the ceiling starts to collapse. Fujino blankly stares at the building that is about to give way. The girl on top of her fell away as the world suddenly

tilted. There is a storm outside, with the ocean below. If she falls without being able to grab onto something, she will surely die. Fujino takes command of her body, which is even having trouble breathing. She tells it that this place is going to collapse, so she has to get away from here. Dragging her nearly burned-out body, Fujino exits the parking lot. The shopping mall is relatively free of damage. The square corridor is now a rhombus.

Fujino walks, or at least she thinks she is walking... then falls. She cannot breathe. Her legs will not move. Her head is in a daze and she cannot think. What is there is..... yes, only the strong pain inside of her. For the first time, Fujino thinks she is going to die. It hurts so much. It is unbearable. It's better to just die than live on with this pain.

"..... Cough"

Laying face down, Fujino coughs out blood. On the ground, she is in a daze. In her whitewashed vision, she can only make out her blood. Red blood... red vision. The setting sun seems like it is burning...it always seems like it is burning...

"No..... I do not... want to die."

Fujino reaches out her arms. If her legs will not move, she will have to use her arms. Dragging her body, she inches forward. If she doesn't do so, Death will come for her. Fujino keeps moving. She can only sense pain. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts... those are the only words she can think about. It is the feeling of pain she finally obtained, but she hates it now. But..... It is true. It hurts... It really hurts, so she continues wishing. She does not want to die. She does not want to disappear. She has to keep living and do something. Because she has not done anything, or left anything behind...

That is too miserable.

That is too empty.

... That is too sad.

But it hurts. It hurts so much that the will to continue living might go numb and disappear . It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts. It hurts, but... ... Fujino moves her arms while still coughing up blood. What she repeats are the same words. For the first time in her life, Fujino wishes strongly.

... I want to live longer.

... I want to talk longer.

... I want to love longer.

... I want to stay here longer.....

But nothing moves now. Only the pain repeats. This is the true form of what she was enjoying. The truth hurts more than anything for Asagami Fujino. Now she truly understands the sins she has committed, the meaning of the blood she has spilled. The meaning is so heavy that she cannot even apologize. She only recalls the kind smile. *If that person were here... would he still hug me*? Her body convulses. The blood rolling up her throat tells her of the final pain about to come. That impact causes her light to go away. Now she can only see what is left in her. No, even that is fading away..... Not being able to stand the

loneliness of disappearing, Fujino talks aloud. Her true will that she has hidden so stubbornly. ... A small wish that she has dreamed of since she was small.

"..... It hurts. It hurts, Senpai. It really hurts... It hurts so much... I might cry... Mother, can I cry?"

... This is what she wanted to tell someone.

... If she could have said that on that day three years ago...

She cries. It hurts, it's sad, and it's so lonely that she can only cry. But just doing that eases the pain. That person has told her that pain is not something one bears but something one appeals to someone who loves them. Fujino is thankful she met him... really thankful for being able to see him once again before this...

"Are you in pain?"

At the end of the pain, Shiki is standing. She has a knife in one hand. Fujino turns over to face Shiki.

"You should have said so, if you were hurting."

Shiki says so in the end. ... The same words as in Fujino's memories. *Certainly*, Fujino thinks. Even if she could say that starting now, she might not have come down this road. That inconvenient, but normal life dances through her mind, but she cannot go back. She has committed too many sins. She has killed too many people. ... She has killed many people for the sake of her own happiness.

Asagami Fujino slowly stops her own breathing. Her sense of pain quickly disappears. It's fast.

She does not feel the pain of the knife that pierces her chest.

Remaining Sense of Pain /

5

As the storm is hitting town, I return to the office. I enter, wet with rain, and Touko-san greets me by dropping her cigarette.

"You're fast. It's only been a day."

"I heard a storm was coming so I came back before public transportation stopped."

Touko-san nods while making a difficult face. I wonder if something is wrong... No, right now.....

"Touko-san, about Asagami Fujino. She was not born with her pain insensitivity. She was normal until she was six years old."

"What? That can't be true. Look, even though she has pain insensitivity, it's not affecting her physical activities. If you say the pain insensitivity came after she was born, a hollow spine would be the cause; but that causes problems with physical activities. A rare case where she only lacks the sense of pain can only mean that she was born without it."

"Yes, that's what her personal doctor said too."

I want to tell her what happened in Nagano from the beginning but there's no time. I tell her about the Asagami family... no, the AsaGAMI family in a short summary.

"The AsaGAMI family was a respected family, but it went bankrupt when Fujino was around twelve years old. Fujino and her mother went to what is now the Asagami family. It seems the Asagami family is branched off from the AsaGAMI family, and they took care of the borrowed money out of greed for their land. Fujino had her sense of pain when she was small; but with it, she also had a strange power. They say she could bend things without touching them."

"... And?"

"She was hated as the devil. She received oppression too. But from the time Fujino turned six, the power had disappeared, along with her sense of pain."

"....."

Touko-san's expression changes. I can tell she's getting excited from her smile.

"After that she got a personal doctor, but there is no record of that at the AsaGAMI house. That place is empty now."

"That's all? You didn't investigate further!?"

"Of course I did. I found the personal doctor and talked to him."

"..... You're a smart worker, Kokutou."

"Yes, I followed the records and went to Akita. He is an underground doctor without a license, so it took me a whole day to get the story out of him."

"... I'm amazed. If you get fired from here you should become a detective. I'd even hire you as my personal detective."

I reply that I'll think about it, and continue on with my story.

"It seems this doctor only provided medicine. He said he doesn't know why Fujino became pain insensitive. He said that it was her father's doing alone."

"Her father did it himself? Do you mean curing her, or giving her the medicine?"

I nod to the small difference between the two.

"Giving her the medicine of course. According to the doctor, Fujino's father had no intention of curing Fujino's pain insensitivity. Most of the medicine that the doctor provided was Aspirin and Indomethacin, steroids. According to the examination by the doctor, he says Fujino probably has Neuromyelitis Optica."

"Neuromyelitis optica..... Devic's disease, huh?"

Devic's disease. It is a type of myelitis and is a disease that causes numbness of the senses. Common symptoms are numbness in the lower legs and eyesight going bad. It even has the danger of making one blind. This disease requires early treatment with steroids. The steroids are what Touko-san mentioned before... what they call adrenocorticosteroid.

"In addition, they use Indomethacin which numbs the sense of pain. I see. That would indeed make her like that. She's not inherent or posteriori. Asagami Fujino lost her senses artificially. It's the exact opposite of Shiki!"

Touko-san starts to laugh. It's a bit scary, she is like the professor I saw yesterday.

"Touko-san, what is this Indomethacin?"

"It's a painkiller. It doesn't matter if it's peripheral or referred pain, pain occurs from reactions to "outside forces that might endanger life". An algesic substance is made inside your body which stimulates the nerves relating to pain. This triggers pain to your brain. It tells the brain that the body will die if it doesn't do something. You know what algesic substances are, right? There are things such as Kinin and Amin, as well as Arachidonic Acid metabolites which strengthen the two. Things such as Aspirin and Indomethacin control the Prostaglandin which is in this Arachidon. The pain from Kinin and Amin isn't much, so taking in a lot of Indomethacin would take away most of the pain."

Touko-san seems really happy, as she is relatively hyper.

To be honest, these Arachidon and Kinindon things seems like names of monsters to me.

"So it's a medicine to erase pain?"

"Not directly. If you want to erase the pain, a drug called opioid would do much better. There's the endorphin thing, right? It's that thing that the brain secretes to ease the pain. It works like that and opioid kills the pain in the central nervous system. ..... Well, I guess all this has nothing to do with the subject. I see. Asagami Fujino's father decided to seal her power by sealing her senses. A family totally opposite of that of Ryougi, which tries so hard to make ones with power. But what's sad is that her power became stronger by doing that. Magi from in and around Egypt stitch their eyes shut to keep their Mana within them. What's the difference between them and Asagami Fujino?"

... I was prepared for Touko-san's words, but I'm still shocked. I knew already that the Asagami family has children with special powers, like those of Asagami Fujino... ones born with different channels. They despised those children and tried to seal their power by any means possible. The result of that is... pain insensitivity. To turn off the channel for "special powers", they also closed the function of senses. That is why Asagami Fujino operates her power when her pain returns... because her sealed senses return.

"That's terrible. The only way for her to stay normal is to be abnormal."

That's right. Asagami Fujino could be in our world only by being abnormal in the form of pain insensitivity. But as long as she cannot feel anything, she cannot earn anything. She is only a ghost allowed to live in our world.

"If she did not feel pain, she would not have killed anyone."

"Hey now, don't treat pain like it's a bad thing. Pain is a good thing. The bad thing is the wound, you shouldn't get this wrong. We need pain, no matter how much it hurts. People can recognize danger because they have pain. Do we move away from fire simply because it sets our hands on fire? No. It is because your hand is burning, and it hurts. If that's not the case, we would not know the danger of fire until our hand burnt off. It is right for pain to be painful, Kokutou. Anything that doesn't have that cannot understand other people's pain. Asagami Fujino was hit in the back and got her sense of pain back temporarily. She defended herself for the first time from the pain she received after that. Those people that she didn't notice as dangerous before, she was able to recognize as dangerous because of pain. ... Still, killing them was too much."

... But Fujino does not feel pain. Those people died because of her defending herself, but they are partly responsible as they attacked her. You cannot make her bear all the responsibility.

"Touko-san, can she be cured?"

"There is no wound that cannot be cured. A wound that cannot be cured should be called "death"."

Touko-san indirectly calls Asagami Fujino's wound death. But the cause of these incidents is the stab wound in her stomach. If that pain comes back, if the cause of that pain is known.....

"Kokutou, her wound cannot be cured. It will only continue to hurt."

"Huh?"

"She had no wound to begin with, Kokutou."

.....Touko-san says something unexpected.

"Um... what do you mean by that?"

"Think about it. If you got stabbed in the stomach, would the wound heal by itself in a day or two?"

... That... is true but...

I get confused at the point Touko-san is making. It goes against all assumptions. Touko-san tries to hold back her laughter.

"Like you investigating Asagami Fujino's past, I also investigated Asagami Fujino's present. Fujino has not gone to any hospitals since the 20th. She did not even go to the personal doctor that she sees secretly."

"Personal... what!?"

Touko-san frowns in amazement.

"... You're good at searching for things but lack in insight. Look, the scariest thing for a pain insensitive person is something wrong with their body. Since they do not have pain, they cannot know of any sicknesses they might have. As a result, they have a doctor look at them from time to time."

I see. She is completely right. Then... do Asagami Fujino's current parents not know of her pain insensitivity?

"The trigger was a trivial misunderstanding, Kokutou. Fujino was taken down by a guy with a knife and thought she was going to get stabbed. No, I bet she did almost get stabbed. Since her sense of pain returned at that time, she could use her power too. Cut or twist... Fujino happened to be first. As a result, the guy's neck was twisted off and his blood spilled onto Fujino's body. Fujino must have thought that she had been stabbed in the stomach."

I can clearly imagine the scene... I shake my head.

"But that's strange. If her sense of pain is back, she wouldn't make that kind of a mistake. She would not feel pain if she was not stabbed.

"Fujino was in pain from the start."

..... Huh?

"I was shown her status by her doctor. She has chronic Cecitis... what people mistakenly call Appendicitis. Well, I guess that is why she went to the doctor. The pain in the stomach is not the pain from the knife, but rather an internal pain. Her pain ached from time to time. If her sense of pain returned right before being stabbed, she would surely think that she was stabbed. If you are raised not knowing pain, you wouldn't even make sure if the wound is there or not. Fujino would look at the stabbed stomach, and even if it didn't have a wound, she would think that the wound must have healed."

"So... it's a misunderstanding?"

I say so weakly.

"The wound itself is. But the truth does not change. She was indeed on the edge. It doesn't matter if the knife was there or not. Her only way out was to kill them. If she did not kill, she would have been killed. Not her body but her mind. But unfortunately, Minato Keita got away. I don't think it would have turned out this bad if her revenge was completed then. It's just like Shiki said. It's too late."

Come to think of it, Shiki did repeat that. Why would it be too late? Is it because Fujino has committed murder? But then, that would be when she killed those four guys. I don't understand.

"Why is it too late?"

"Shiki must mean the mental part. Her murder is murder for up to five people. A murder other than those is not murder, but a massacre. It is not justified. That is what Shiki was angry about. ... Shiki has a taste for murder but she still understands unconsciously how important death is. That is why she does not kill indiscriminately like Asagami Fujino. Shiki cannot forgive Fujino for just doing as she wishes."

Is Asagami Fujino really doing as she wishes? To me, it seems like she is running away desperately. Touko-san continues.

"But what I mean by too late is the physical part. Cecitis perforate when left alone and become peritonitis. Inflammation comes with pain incomparable to that of the vermiform appendix. You could say it matches the pain of being stabbed with a knife. Then, one would start getting fevers and cyanosis. They may even go into shock from lowered blood pressure. If it reaches the duodenum, you could die in half a day. It's been five days since the 20th. It should already have perforated. It's a shame, but it's fatal for her already."

How can this person say that with such a cool face?

"It's not too late yet. We have to find her quickly...!"

"Kokutou, our client for this is Asagami Fujino's father. He must have known about Fujino's power. That is why he heard about the incident and thought it must be Fujino's doing. The father said to "kill that monster". The only one that can protect her is wishing for her death. See, Kokutou, she has no salvation in any sense. And besides, Shiki already left."

"..... You idiot...!"

I scream at no one.

6

Broad Bridge is distorted like it has been squeezed by a giant hand. After coming here in the storm in Touko-san's buggy and arguing with the guard, Shiki shows up from under the bridge with a blood-soaked arm. The guard runs up to Shiki, but she tackles him and knocks him unconscious.

"Yo. For some reason, I thought you'd be here."

Shiki says this with a pale face. There were many things I wanted to say, but they all disappear when I see how weak she is. I run to help her, but Shiki refuses and does not even let me support her.

"So you managed with just one arm, huh, Shiki?"

Touko-san seems surprised. Shiki glares in discontent.

"Touko, she came up with clairvoyance in the end. She'll have a ridiculous amount of power if you leave her be."

"Clairvoyance, huh? Certainly, if you add that to her power, she'll be invincible. She would be able to make a fulcrum even if you are hiding... Huh? If you leave her be...?"

"She returned to pain insensitivity at the very end. That's cheating. Asagami Fujino in that state can't be my target. I couldn't do anything else so I just killed the disease in her stomach. She might make it if you hurry."

Shiki did not kill Asagami Fujino. Understanding that, I quickly call the hospital. I'm not sure if they would be willing to come in this storm, but if they won't, I'll just take her there myself. Fortunately, her doctor agrees to come. He was worried when Fujino disappeared, and it seemed he was crying over the phone. There may not be many, but Fujino still has people on her side. I am moved. Behind me, those two are having a dangerous conversation.

"Did you stop the bleeding on that arm? It doesn't seem to be, at least."

"Yeah, I killed it 'cause it was useless. You can make an arm, right? You're a puppet master, after all."

"All right. That will be your pay for this job. I always thought that your body was too normal in contrast to your eyes. I can make that left arm able to grab spirits and such."

... I don't want them talking about such things.

"An ambulance is going to come here. It'll be lots of trouble to stay here, so do you want to get away?"

Touko-san nods, but Shiki is silent. ...She probably wants to make sure that Asagami Fujino does get taken away safely.

"Since I contacted them, I'll stay here. I'll tell you what happened, so you can go back."

"In this strong rain? You sure are strange. All right, let's go back, Shiki."

Shiki refuses Touko-san's offer. Touko-san smiles somewhat meanly and gets in her off-road buggy, which seems totally illegal.

"Shiki. Don't kill Kokutou just because you couldn't kill Asagami Fujino."

Touko-san says so seriously and drives off. In the summer rain, Shiki and I end up seeking shelter in the nearby warehouse.

◇

The ambulance comes in no time and carries off Asagami Fujino. In this storm, I cannot see her face. I cannot make sure that she's the girl from that one night, but I think that's for the best. Shiki blankly stares into the night, wet from the rain. She was glaring at Fujino all this time. I inquire as to her feelings amid the sound of rain.

"Shiki, you still can't forgive Asagami Fujino?"

"..... I don't care about the one I already killed."

Shiki declares so. There's no hate or anything there. For Shiki, Fujino must be someone she does not know anymore. ... It's sad but that might be the best for these two. Shiki casts a glance at me.

"How about you? You say murder is wrong no matter what the reason is."

She seems like she's asking herself the question.

"... Yeah, but I sympathize with her. To be honest, I couldn't care less about Fujino killing the guys who violated her."

"That's unexpected. I was hoping for your popular opinion."

... Do you want to be blamed, Shiki? You didn't kill anyone. I close my eyes and listen to the rain.

"Really? But that is my opinion. Because, Shiki, even though she lost herself, Asagami Fujino is a normal girl. She will take in what she's done without changing the facts to suit her. Even if she does give herself up to the police, no one can prove what she's done and she won't be socially responsible for her sins. That's what makes it more difficult."

"Why?"

"..... I think sins are things people willingly burden themselves with. A burden that one casts on themselves according to their views, that is what a sin is. The more compassion you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. The more common sense you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. Asagami Fujino's sins become heavier and more painful as she gets happier."

Shiki tells me I'm too good-natured.

"Then does that mean those without compassion have no sense of what sin is?"

"I don't think anyone exists without a sense of sin. It just means that their sins are lighter to bear, but they are still there. A small sin within their small scope of compassion. For us it might seem trivial, like tripping on a road; but for that person, it becomes a burden. Even the small pain for us becomes an unpleasant feeling for those with small compassion. No matter the weight, the meaning of a sin is the same."

... Yes. For example, Minato Keita was probably frightened to the point of insanity because of the realization of his sins. He cannot atone for his regret, sense of guilt, fear, or impatience; all he can do is *try* to atone for them.

"Certainly, it must be easier to not be responsible for your sins socially. But if no one punishes you for your sins, you have to carry them yourself. A guilty conscience is not something that goes away, right? You have memories of it. Since no one forgave you for it,

you cannot forgive yourself. The wound in your heart never heals and will continue to hurt. Like her sense of pain remaining, the wound would never heal. As you say, a soul does not have a physical form..... so I don't think a wound on it can be treated.

Shiki is listening silently. Maybe because I looked up Fujino's past, I'm unusually poetic. Shiki suddenly leaves the cover of the warehouse and goes out into the rain.

"So you're saying this: the more common sense you have, the more sense of sin you have. That's why there are no bad people in this world. But I have no such thing. Could you let such a person run unbounded?"

Now that she says so, that is indeed true. Before you can call Shiki good or bad, she has a small concept of common sense.

"I see. Then I guess it can't be helped. I'll have to bear all your sins then."

Those are my true feelings. They seem to have caught Shiki off guard, as she stands there dumbfounded. After being struck by the rain for a while, Shiki murmurs uncomfortably.

"... I finally remember... You say those kinds of jokes with a straight face."

To be honest, Shiki found it hard to deal with such things.

"..... *Sigh* I see. I do think I can at least carry one girl on me, you know."

I argue timidly, and Shiki laughs.

"I'll confess one more thing, I think I've borne another sin with this thing today. But I found out something in return. What my life is, and what I want. It's vague and fragile, but I will have to follow it for now. It turns out that what I'm following isn't as ugly as I thought it was. I'm a bit happy. A bit... A killing impulse that is slightly leaning towards your image..."

... I can only frown at her last sentence, but Shiki is beautiful as she smiles against the rain. The storm should go away by morning.

I keep staring at Shiki, surrounded by the summer rain. Come to think of it, this is the first true smile she's ever shown me since she recovered from the coma...

Remaining Sense of Pain (ever life, never cry) / Fin

4 The Hollow Shrine

Garan-no-dou.

———and she said.

If you are willing to take in anything
You'll never be wounded.
Anything that you don't fit.
Anything that you don't like.
Anything that you don't allow.
If you take in anything without reacting
You'll never be wounded.

If you are willing to reject everything
You'll only be wounded.
Everything that you fit.
Everything that you like.
Everything that you dream.
If you reject everything without a sacrifice
You'll only be wounded.

A gap between two hearts.
Unable to both affirm and deny.
Between them, there is nothing.
Between them, there is I.

/0

"Hey, about that patient in the third floor private room, have you heard?"

"Of course. That story was all over the place by the middle of yesterday. Even that stony Doctor Ashika in neurology lost his cool, didn't he? There's no way a secret like that wouldn't leak out. I couldn't believe it but, they say the patient's recovered."

"No, no, it's not that. Well, it is definitely about that patient, but there's something besides that. That patient, you know what she did as soon as she woke up? Don't be shocked, but they say she tried to crush her own eyes."

"What are you talking about? Is that for real?"

"Yeah, I think it's being kept secret inside the facility. I heard it from a kid who always follows Doctor Ashika around, so it's definitely true. Apparently, as soon as Doctor Ashika took his eyes off her, she smashed her eyes through the bandages with the palms of her hands. She's a total terror."

"Wait a second. That patient, she's just been lying there for two years, hasn't she? Then there's no way she could move her body."

"Well, yeah, normally. That family is rich, aren't they? While she's been here, we've exercised her limbs everyday, so her joints and stuff haven't stiffened up. But I guess that since it wasn't the subject herself doing the exercise, the movement of the joints was unnatural to her and she couldn't move very well. Thanks to that, her attempt to destroy her eyes ended in failure."

"Even so, that's awesome. We learned that while an inactive patient is more comfortable, it's much easier for their bodies to get weak. If she's been sleeping for two years, she should barely have been functioning as a human."

"That's why even the doctor was caught off guard. Hey, what do you call that? You know, when a patient's sclera is bleeding?"

"Subconjunctival hemorrhaging."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. It's supposed to become alright by itself, but since the patient smashed her eyes right to the point of glaucoma she can't even see through her eyes right now. They say that they just bandaged her eyes according to the patient's wishes."

"Hmm. So even after waking up from that coma the patient hasn't seen the sunlight... Darkness within darkness. It seems a bit wrong."

"A bit? And on top of that, there's another problem. Aphasia... Loss of speech? It feels like that. She can't talk, so the doctor's bringing in a speech therapist. There's no one like that at our hospital."

"Yeah, since Doctor Araya quit last month. But, if she's like that, will they disallow visitors for that patient?"

"Probably. Until she's recovered her psychological balance, even her time with her parents will be limited."

"So that's how it is. In that case, I feel kinda sorry for that boy."

"Who? What boy?"

"Don't you know? After that patient was brought here, there's this kid who came to visit every Saturday. I guess he's too old to call a kid anymore, but, if possible, I want to let him meet her."

"Ah, you mean polite Puppy-kun. Wow, he's still coming. I doubt there are many people as earnest as that in the world these days."

"Yeah, for the last two years that kid's been the only one who watched over the patient. So, I'm thinking that maybe the major part in the patient's miraculous recovery is due to him... Wow, I'm saying this sort of thing after working here for how many years? I'm beginning to think that maybe something's happened to me."

/1

◇

This place was dark, and the floor was pitch black. When I realized that the only thing around me was the darkness, I had accepted the fact that I was dead.

I was floating in a sea with no light or sound.

Naked, without anything to cover her, the human being called Ryougi Shiki was sinking into the depths.

There was no light here. No, I suspect I had never fallen in the first place. Since there was nothing here.

It wasn't just that there was no light, there wasn't even any darkness. Since there was nothing here, nothing was visible. There was no meaning to the concept of falling.

Inside the「 」within which even form was meaningless, just my body kept sinking. The naked me; I'm a poisonous shade which made me want to turn my eyes away. Because everything「here」bore such a poisonous aura.

"–––This is death."

Even the sound of my muttering seemed like a dream.

Then, I observed something like "time". Time had no meaning inside「 」, but I became able to observe it. As naturally as flowing water, as grossly as putrefaction, I was just marking time.

There was nothing here.

Even if I kept continuously looking in the distance, I couldn't see anything. Even if I kept waiting continuously for something, I couldn't see anything.

It was very nice and peaceful.

No, since nothing had meaning, just「being」here made everything perfect.

This was death.

The world which only the dead could reach. The world which the living could not see.

But, I was still alive–

I thought I would lose my mind.

For two years I sat there in the midst of the concept called “death”. Rather then observation, it was closer to the struggle of battle.

◇

With the arrival of morning, the hospital had slowly come to life. The footsteps of the nurses traversing the corridors, and the noise of the patients waking up and going about their own business, was repeated many-fold. Compared to the silence during the night the bustle of the morning made me feel like I was at a festival.

For the recently awoken me, the riotous noise was too much.

Thankfully, my ward was a private room. It was noisy outside, but at least inside this box it was calm and quiet.

Not much later, a doctor had come to examine me.

“How do you feel, Ryougi-san?”

“Well, I’m not really sure.”

At my emotionless reply, the doctor shut up as if he was perplexed.

“... Really? At least you seem more calm than yesterday. It might be troubling for you, but I’ll explain your current situation. If you don’t like what I’m saying, don’t hesitate to tell me.”

I replied to the doctor’s words with silence. I didn’t have any interest in such obvious stories.

I think he mistook that for a sign of acceptance.

“In that case, I’ll make it brief. Today is the fourteenth of June, 1998. You, Ryougi Shiki, were involved in a nighttime traffic accident on the fifth of March two years ago and were brought here to this hospital. The accident involved you being hit by a car while on a pedestrian crossing. Do you remember?”

“.....”

I didn’t reply. I didn’t know that sort of thing. The last image I could take off of the shelf called “memory” was that of my classmate standing dumbly in the rain. I couldn’t remember anything like how I got into an accident.

“Ah, it’s alright if you can’t remember. We think that just before you got hit by the car, you realized the danger and tried to evade it. Thanks to that, the injuries to your body weren’t serious. In exchange, we suspect that you received a hard shock to your head. You were already in a coma by the time you arrived at our hospital, but luckily your brain itself wasn’t injured. So, the reason you can’t remember is probably the confusion brought about by being in a coma for two years. It should only be temporary, as during last night’s examination we didn’t find any abnormalities in your brainwaves. Your memories should slowly come back, but I can’t guarantee that it will definitely happen. First and foremost, the very fact that you recovered from your comatose state is a miracle in itself.”

Even if he says it had been two years, it didn’t feel real to me. To the sleeping Ryougi Shiki, that blank space was close to nothingness.

To the being called Ryougi Shiki, yesterday was definitely that rainy night two years ago.

But that wasn’t how I felt at all.

To the current me, yesterday was「nothing」.

“Oh, and the injury to your eyes isn’t so serious either. Injuries caused by blunt weapons are among the least serious eye injuries you tend to see. It’s a relief that there weren’t any knives or similar objects in your proximity last night. We are going to take the bandages off soon as well. You’ll have to leave looking at the scenery outside for another week or so.”

I got the feeling that there was a sense of reproach mixed somewhere into the doctor’s words. He was probably nervous because of my attempt to destroy my own eyes before. Last night he kept asking me why I had done such a thing; I didn’t give him an answer.

“From now on we will be doing rehabilitation exercises in the mornings and afternoons. In regard to visits from your family, I’m afraid one hour will be the limit. You can leave as soon as you recover your body and mind’s equilibrium. It will be hard, but please try your best.”

As I expected, his words ruined my mood.

Tired of poking fun at the doctor, I tried moving my right hand… My body didn’t feel like my own. Just moving took time, and my joints and muscles hurt as if they were being pulverized.

Of course, it was only to be expected after not using them for two years.

“Well, that’s it for this morning. Since it seems that you’ve calmed down, I won’t call a nurse. If you need anything, press that button near your pillow. There’s always a nurse standing by in the room next door, so don’t hesitate to use it, even for small things.”

Those were soft words. If I could see, I would’ve be able to observe the doctor’s instantaneous smile.

The doctor got up to leave, but stopped at the door and added something, as if he had just remembered.

“Oh yes. A counselor is going to come starting tomorrow. Since she’s not much older than you, please talk freely with her. Right now, what you need most to aid your recovery is conversation.

And so I was left alone.

I laid back on the hospital bed, I was just laying there blankly with arms wrapped around the eyes I had closed myself.

“My name...”

I said with dry lips.

“Ryougi Shiki.”

But no such person existed here.

Because the two years of nothingness had killed me.

I could clearly remember all the memories of growing up as Ryougi Shiki. But what did that matter? What were such memories to me, who had died and come back to life? The two years of emptiness had completely disconnected the me of the past and the me of the present.

I’m definitely Ryougi Shiki, not someone else. But the memories of the past; I couldn’t feel that they were mine. To the resurrected me, it was only like I was watching a movie about the life of a person called Ryougi Shiki. I couldn’t think of the movie’s main character as being me.

“It’s as if I’m a ghost caught on film.”

I bit my lip.

I didn’t know me.

I wasn’t sure whether I really was Ryougi Shiki. I felt like a human who didn’t know their own identity.

This shell of a body was empty; it felt like a cave. Even the air passed through, like the wind.

I didn’t know the cause, but it really felt like a huge hole had been punched into my chest.

It was so unsettling; indeed it was lonely. My heart was a misplaced puzzle piece. Inside that empty space, this feather-like me couldn’t stand it.

It was so empty that I couldn’t even find a reason to keep living.

“But... So what if it’s like that, Shiki?”

It really wasn’t such a big deal.

It was fascinating, this unsettling feeling and nervousness that had made me grasp my chest, I didn’t feel that it was either agonizing or sad.

There was anxiety. There was pain. But that was all something the child called Ryougi Shiki was holding onto. I was just apathetic. Even that fact that I had come back to life after two years failed to move me.

I was just swaying with the wind and wandering here and there. Without being able to feel that I was actually alive.

/2

It was now the next day.

The fact that even I, who couldn't see, could tell the arrival of the morning was a small but satisfying discovery. Little things like that were a cause for joy. While I wondered why they made me happy, my morning check-up had begun and ended before I even knew it.

It wasn't very quiet in the afternoon, because my mother and older brother had come to visit me. Our conversation wasn't very smooth. They felt like strangers to me. With no alternatives, I answered their questions according to Shiki's memories. As a result, my mother went home with an easy mind.

Everything was funny because, it seemed like I was acting.

◇

When evening had come around, the counselor showed up.

The woman, who initially introduced herself as a speech therapist, was so bright and cheerful that I couldn't see any depth to her personality.

"Hi, how have you been?"

I had never heard of a case where a doctor greeted a patient with those words

"Oh, I thought you would be all emaciated, but the vibrancy of your skin is no joke. You know, when I first heard your story I pictured something along the lines of a ghost under a cherry tree, so I didn't really feel like coming. But hey, you are a cute young lady, along my line of fancy, so it's my lucky day!"

The woman who, judging by her voice, I reckoned to be in her late twenties, sat down in the chair next to the bed I was laying in.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm the speech therapist who is supposed to help you get over your aphasia. I'm not a resident doctor here, so I don't have any ID, but I guess it won't be a problem since you can't see anyway."

"Aphasia? Me?" I retorted.

I got the feeling she nodded her head.

“There you go; it’s normal to show anger. After all, aphasia isn’t a very good image, and in your case it’s a misdiagnosis. Ashika-kun is a textbook doctor, so he’s a bit weak when it comes to special cases like yours. Even so, you are being naughty. People are getting such misconceptions because you can’t be bothered to answer them.”

The woman smiled as if she was great friends with me. It was totally my own opinion, but I had decided then and there that this was a person who wore glasses.

“So they think I have aphasia.”

“Yeah, since you did hurt your brain in the accident they are wondering if your speech circuits are damaged or something. However, that’s a misconception – the reason for your silence isn’t physiological, but psychological, isn’t it? So it’s not aphasia, just you being stubborn. In that case my role isn’t needed, but it feels bad to be cut off before a minute has passed, and since nothing’s happening with my main job I’ll play with you for a bit.”

... That was none of your business. I reached out for the button to call the nurse, but the lady-doctor quickly removed it from my reach.

“... You.”

“Dangerous, dangerous. If you talk to Ashika-kun now I’ll be kicked out straight away. Anyway, isn’t this good? If you pretend to have aphasia, you won’t have to reply to useless questions. It’s better this way, right?”

... That was correct. But who was this person that could say a such thing so boldly?

I turned my bandaged eyes towards the unknown lady-doctor.

“You are not a doctor, are you?”

“Nope, I’m a Magus as my main job.”

That was so absurd I had let out a sigh.

“I don’t have any business with a magician.”

“Ahaha, that’s correct. A magician can’t fix that hole in your chest. The only thing that can fill it is a normal person.”

“A hole, in my chest?”

“Yeah, you should be feeling it. That you are alone now.”

The lady doctor smothered a laugh and stood up. I could hear her arranging the chairs and her footsteps as she went out.

“I think it’s still too early, so let’s leave it at this for now. I’ll come again tomorrow, bye!”

After appearing so abruptly, she had leaved equally as suddenly. I touched my lips with the right hand that I had difficulty moving.

Now... Alone...

A hole... In my chest...

Ah, how could this be?

Oh no, I hadn't realized.

There was no one. No matter where I called he wasn't there. The existence called Ryougi SHIKI that had existed within Ryougi Shiki had disappeared without a trace.

◇

Shiki had suffered from a dual personality disorder and had possessed another personality within herself. Inside the Ryougi family, children with two personalities were born genetically. That which would be shunned in a normal family was instead celebrated as inherent of a transcendent being, and those that bore it were treated as the true heirs of the family.

... Shiki had inherited that blood. It was the reason Shiki surpassed her older brother to become the heir to the Ryougi family.

But this kind of thing didn't happen very often.

Two personalities; Yang affinity males and Yin affinity females. Between those the leadership of the Yang affinity male was usually stronger. Among the few true Ryougi heirs until now, all had been born as men and had female personalities inside. But due to some mistake, Shiki was the reverse of the norm.

Inside the female Shiki, the male, SHIKI, was included.

The one with dominance over the body was the female Shiki, me.

SHIKI was my minus face. He had contained my suppressed emotions. Shiki grew up suppressing the darkness called SHIKI. Time after time, she killed the self called SHIKI and lived pretending to be normal. SHIKI didn't seem to have any complaints about that. After being asleep inside of me, he woke up for things like sword training and took charge while complaining as if it was annoying.

... It might seem like a master-servant relationship, but the reality wasn't like that. In the end, Shiki and SHIKI were one person, so Shiki's actions are SHIKI's, and SHIKI suppressing his own fancies was also Shiki's wish as well.

... Yes, SHIKI was a murderer. As far as I knew he had no experience at it, but he had a desire within him to kill those beings called humans that were the same organism as him. The dominant personality of Shiki ignored this, in short, she had forbade it.

Shiki and SHIKI were inseparable beings, although they had ignored each other. Shiki was lonely, but because of the self called SHIKI, she hadn't been alone.

But the time had come when that relationship was destroyed.

Two years ago Shiki was a first year high school student. That was the season, when for the first time, SHIKI, who hadn't wanted to use the body until then, asked to go out of his own volition.

From there on, Shiki's memory was hazy.

Right now I couldn't bring to mind any of Shiki's memories; from the beginning of the first year of high school up to when I was involved in the accident.

The thing I did remember, was my shape standing at the site of the murder. More than that though, there was an image that I could remember even more clearly.

The classroom was burning red in the light of the sunset.

The one who had destroyed Shiki, my classmate.

The boy, who Shiki had wanted to kill.

The piece of normality, that Shiki had wanted to protect.

I had gotten the feeling that I knew this a long time ago.

But, for this me, that had awakened from a long sleep, his name was the one thing I couldn't yet remember.

◇

Night fell, and the hospital grew quiet. Only the occasional sound of slippers echoing through the corridors made me feel that I was awake.

Inside the darkness, no, because I was in the darkness this blind me took to heart the fact that I was alone. If I had been the previous Shiki I wouldn't have had this kind of feeling. If I had been the Shiki who had another self inside her. But SHIKI no longer existed. No, I myself didn't even know whether I was Shiki or SHIKI.

SHIKI had disappeared from inside me. With that alone, I recognized myself as Shiki.

"Hic hic... What kind of contradiction is this? Not knowing which side one is, when the other side is missing."

I tried talking to myself, but the emptiness in my chest didn't even fill a little. Even just the thought that I was sad should've had some change on this emotionless mind of mine.

I wouldn't be able to know.

Since I was no one, I couldn't feel that Ryougi Shiki's memories were really mine. Even if the shell called Ryougi Shiki existed, when the contents were washed away, the shell had no meaning... Oh, it hurt. What must go inside this empty cave?

"–––I, will, go, in."

Suddenly I heard words like that.

A movement of the air as if a door had opened.

It was probably my imagination. I turned my closed eyes that way.

There was... something there.

White smoke was billowing. My eyes that shouldn't have been able to see could see the shape of the smoke. The smoke strangely resembled a human. No, it seemed as if a human that lacked bones and was swaying in the wind, like a sunflower.

The unpleasant smoke came straight at me.

I couldn't move as I liked yet, so I just blankly waited for it. Even if this was a ghost, I wasn't afraid.

The really scary things have no shape. No matter how weird something was, if it had form, I couldn't be scared.

And if it was a ghost, the current me might have been the same as well. After all, there wasn't much difference between a thing that wasn't alive and me, who had no reason to live.

The smoke slapped me.

My whole body and mind went into overdrive. The chill that raked down my spine was as sharp as a bird's talons.

It was an unpleasant sensation, but I just dumbly sat there and watched. After touching me for an age, the smoke melted like a snail sprinkled with salt.

The reason was simple. It had been five hours since the smoke started touching me. It would soon be five o'clock. The ghost melted because it was now morning.

Since I hadn't slept, I decided to go to sleep again.

/3

I had lost track of how many days it had been since I woke up, but morning had come around again. My eyes were still wrapped in bandages, so I couldn't see a thing. It was a quiet morning with no one around.

The wavelet-like silence was so dazzling that I lost my sense of self.

–I could hear the chattering of little birds.

–I could feel the warmth of the sunlight.

–My lungs felt the clear air.

–Ah. Compared to that world, this place was so beautiful.

But, there was a self that wasn't happy with this. Every time I was wrapped in the morning air that I could only feel by sensing it, I just thought:

–They are this happy.

Humans are loners like this. Being alone is safest, so how come we couldn't bear being alone?

The past me had been complete. Because I was self-sufficient I didn't need anyone else. But, I was different now. I was no longer complete. I was waiting for a part I lacked. I was just desperately waiting like this.

But just who was I waiting for...?

◇

The lady-doctor who called herself a counselor came daily. Before I knew it, I seemed to be treating my talks with her as my only relief from the mundane during the course of the days.

"Hmm, as expected. It's not that SHIKI didn't have control over the body, it's just that he didn't exercise it. You two keep getting more fascinating the more I hear about you."

Still bringing the chair over and sitting there next to the bed, the lady-doctor talked as if she was amused by something. For some reason she knew my circumstances very well: the dual personality that only a few knew about, even within the Ryougi family, and my involvement in the serial murder case two years ago. Those were details that normally I would have to keep hidden, but to me, they were inconsequential events anyway.

Before I knew it, I was responding to the counselor's light teasing.

"There's nothing funny about having a dual personality."

"No, no. You know, you two don't have anything as pleasing to look at as dissociative identity disorder. Existing simultaneously, each having their own unique will, and on top of that your actions are coordinated. That sort of complex personality shouldn't be called 'dissociated identity,' but rather 'composite individual personalities'."

"Composite... individual personalities?"

"Yeah. Still, some questions remain. In that case, there was no reason for SHIKI to stay asleep, but according to your story he was always sleeping. That part of it is a little strange."

SHIKI, who had always been asleep.

I was probably the only one who knew why.

SHIKI, had liked to dream more than Shiki.

"So, is he still sleeping, that guy?"

I didn't reply to the lady-doctor's words.

"So that's how it is. He did die. Two years ago during the accident, he died in your stead. That's why you have an omission in your memory. Since he's dead, those memories won't be coming back... How Ryougi Shiki was associated with the street serial killer... with this, that knowledge has truly disappeared into the darkness."

"That event. They said that the criminal was never caught."

"Yeah. After your accident, the criminal disappeared as if he were a lie."

The lady doctor added with a laugh, "I wondered to what extent that was true."

"However, there was no reason for SHIKI-kun to disappear. If he just stayed asleep, ignoring the world outside, Shiki would have disappeared. For some reason, he must have wished for himself to disappear."

That kind of thing, even if she asked me I didn't have any answers.

"I don't know. More importantly, did you bring the scissors?"

"Ah, as expected, I couldn't. You have a history, so any potential weapons are strictly forbidden."

The lady-doctor's words were according to my expectations. Whether or not it was due to the daily rehab exercises, my body had recovered to the point where I could move easily by

myself. They said that I was the first to have recovered so quickly with just a few minutes of exercise twice a day.

As a celebration of sorts, I had asked the lady-doctor for a pair of scissors.

“But what are you going to use a pair of scissors for? Planning to do some flower arrangements?”

“As if. I just want to cut my hair.”

That was why. Now that I could move my body, my hair that reached my back had become inconvenient. Hair that bounced around from my neck and flowed down to my shoulders was pretty annoying.

“Then you can call a hairdresser. If you find it difficult to talk, should I call one for you?”

“No thanks. Another person touching my hair? I don’t even want to think about it.”

“That’s right. To a woman, her hair is her life. The fact that your hair has grown while you are the same as you were two years ago is a wonderful thing.”

I could hear the lady-doctor standing up.

“So, shall I give you this instead? It’s a stone, carved with a Rune; it should do the same thing as a charm. I’ll put it over your doorway, so be careful not to lose it to anyone.”

It seemed that the lady doctor used her chair to place the charm, or whatever it was, over the door. And just like that, she opened the door.

“Then, that’s it from me. Someone else might come starting tomorrow, so stay well.”

Talking in a strange roundabout manner, the lady doctor left.

◇

That night, the guest that always came to visit didn’t appear. The smoke-like ghost, that appeared without failure at midnight, for some reason didn’t enter the room.

The smoke was coming every night and touching me.

I knew that it was dangerous, but I just left it alone. If that ghost got angry at me and tried to kill me, that would’ve been okay too.No, rather, how comfortable would it be if it had just killed me?

For I, who couldn’t even feel that I was alive, there was no reason to keep on living. Instead, it would’ve been easier to just disappear.

In the darkness, I tried touching the bandages covering my eyes. My sight would soon come back. In that case, I would completely ruin my eyes this time around.

I couldn’t see it now, but if I fully recovered then it would be visible again. If I was going to see that world again... I didn’t need anything like these eyes. Even if destroying my eyes meant that I would be unable to see the world on this side of that divide, it was still better than that.

But until that moment, I would be unable to act.

The Shiki of before would have destroyed her eyes without any hesitation, but the current me was stopped having achieved a temporary darkness.

It was so... pitiful.

While I had no will to live, I didn't even have any will to die. This emotionless self of mine didn't feel any attraction towards any action. I could only affirm another's will.

So if that unidentifiable smoke tried to kill me, I had no thoughts of stopping it.

The thought of death held no attraction to me but I didn't feel like resisting it either.

Because... Happiness or sadness, if they were things I could only obtain as Ryougi Shiki...

Then the present me had no reason to live on.

The Hollow Shrine

1

Aozaki Touko had first heard the story of the person called Ryougi Shiki on a nice afternoon, not long after they had entered the month of June. The origin of it all was that the new employee she had just hired on impulse was Ryougi Shiki's friend, and as a way to pass the time, she lent an ear to his story.

According to his tale, the person called Ryougi Shiki had fallen into a comatose state after a traffic accident two years ago. She was retaining her life functions, but there was no possibility of her waking up. Not only that, but the growth of her body also seemed to have stopped. At first, Touko couldn't believe this apparent contradiction. How could a person's life functions continue if they've stopped growing?

"... Hmm, the only time an organism does not grow is if it is dead. No, even pressure over time affects the dead. A corpse passes through the growth called decay and returns to the earth. The only thing that moves but doesn't grow would be that windup doll you brought in and set loose a while ago."

"But it's true. Since the accident, it doesn't look like she's aged a bit. Are there any other cases where a person is in a coma for which there's no explainable cause, Touko-san?"

"Hmmm..." Went Touko upon hearing the new employee's question, and crossed her arms.

"Let's see. There was that famous one in that country over there. A newly married woman in her twenties fell into a coma. She woke up after fifty years had passed, don't you know that one?"

In reply to Touko's words, the new employee said "No," and shook his head.

"Uh, how was that person when she woke up?"

"Extremely normal. As if she hadn't been sleeping for fifty long years. Her mind was revived just as it had been in her twenties. Apparently, it made her husband sad."

"Eh? Sad? How come? His wife's recovery should be a joyous occurrence."

"The thing is, her mind was still just as it was in her twenties, but her body had grown old into its seventies. Even in a comatose state, leaving something alive means that it will degrade, you can't do anything about that.

"So this seventy-year-old granny is always urging her husband to go out as if she's still in her twenties. The husband has lived the seventy years normally, so he's normal. The problem is the wife. Because fifty years have flowed past without her knowledge, she can't accept the fact no matter how you explain it. It's not that she doesn't want to accept it, she really can't conceive it to be the truth.

"It's a tragedy among tragedies. They say that the lady who wanted to go out to play with that wrinkled face of hers was persuaded not to by her husband, who was in tears. They also say that he had this thought: if it was going to be like this, it would have been better if she hadn't woken up at all.

"How was it? This dream-like tragedy, it's actually something that happened in the past. Was it useful?"

In wonder, he actually nodded in response to Touko's sarcastic question.

"Oh, are you onto something?"

He gave a small nod to the impishly smiling Touko.

"...Yeah, a little. I'm thinking it might be like this. That Shiki might be trying not to wake up."

"It sounds like there's a past there. Good. Since I'm bored, shall I listen to the story as a way to pass the time?"

He got angry at Touko, who really thought of it as just another way to kill time, and turned away.

"No thank you. Touko-san, your insensitivity is a real problem."

"What? You are the one who brought it up. I understand, so spill it. It's not just a whim for me either. That Azaka, every time she rings it's Shiki this and Shiki that. If I have no idea as to what kind of person this Shiki is, I can't reply, can I?"

At the mention of Azaka's name, he put on a sour face.

"I've been meaning to ask you for a while, but... How did my little sister come to know you, Touko-san?"

"One year ago at a tourist spot. I got caught up in an impossible situation and my cover was totally blown."

"... Well, okay, but Azaka is a very naive child, so please avoid that talk of what is and what is not around her. She's in that period where I'm worried about her even without her getting involved in all that."

"Azaka... Naive? Well, your relationship with your little sister is your problem, so I won't get involved. Instead, share that story about that kid called Shiki."

Unable to withstand Touko, who had pushed herself onto the desk, he began talking.

He talked about his friend Ryougi Shiki's personality and her unique character.

During high school, he and Ryougi Shiki were classmates. He had a relationship with the name Ryougi Shiki before entering high school, and after getting put in the same class as her, became friends. The only person to have a friendly relationship with Ryougi Shiki, who didn't want any friends, was him.

But, after the street murders during the first year of high school, Ryougi Shiki had begun changing in a strange way.

She had confessed to him that she had a dual personality, and that her other side enjoyed murder.

To be truthful, how Ryougi Shiki was connected to the street murders two years ago was still a mystery. Before anything could be confirmed, she had an accident in front of his eyes and was moved to the hospital.

It was during the first days of March, on that cold night of the falling rain.

It was the kind of story about someone's life. However Touko had treated it as just another story told over a beer, but as the story progressed the smile disappeared from her face.

"That's all there is to know about the relationship between Shiki and me. Although the story is already two years old."

"So is that why her growth has stopped? Stocking up her life. It's not even as if she's a vampire."

Heh, Touko smirked, with the end of the lips curled up.

"So, how do you write that kid's name? It would be in kanji, wouldn't it?"

"It's the Shiki kanji used to write Mathematical Formulas, why?"

"Is it the Shiki kanji in Shikigami? And her family name is Ryougi, meaning duality. That's just perfect."

Stubbing out the cigarette she had been biting in the ashtray, Touko stood up, as if unable to tolerate something any longer.

"Was that hospital in the suburbs? This is getting interesting... I'll be right back."

Without waiting for a reply, Touko had left the office behind her.

I couldn't believe I was getting involved in this sort of nonsense at a place like this. What kind of fate was this? Touko bit her lip.

2

Ryougi Shiki's recovery had been a few days later.

The situation she was in didn't even allow for her relatives to visit, which meant that normal visits were out of the question.

Was it because of that?

Was that the reason that the new employee was concentrating on his desk work, with a sulkiness that made it seem like his whole person had undergone a change?

"It's gloomy, too gloomy."

"Yes ma'am. A light, I'll obtain one that's suitable."

He replied without even looking at Touko.

There were times when a dutiful person could show absurdly eccentric conduct as a result of having missed something. Thinking this teen was of that sort, Touko spoke to him.

"Don't think so obsessively about it. You seem ready to just charge in there tonight or something."

"Impossible, ma'am. That hospital, the security is nothing short of a research lab's."

In contrast to the casual manner in which he replied, it seemed as if he's already carried out a pretty thorough investigation.

Touko shrugged, thinking "Well, I can't let a brand new employee become a criminal."

"... I was going to stay quiet about this, but since you are so agitated, I'll tell you. I'm going to be working at the hospital as a stand-in starting tomorrow. I'll find out how Ryougi Shiki is, so just sit tight for now."

"Eh?"

"It just so happened that I got invited as a doctor. Normally I would have refused, but this time it's not as if it's someone else's business. Seeing as I dragged the story out of you, I thought that I had to at least do this for you."

Touko spoke as if it was no big deal.

Rising up from his chair, he approached Touko and grabbed hold of her two hands. *Voom, voom.* The two people's hands went up and down... Not realizing that this was an expression of his admiration, Touko stared at him with a stiff face.

"You have some strange hobbies, don't you?"

"I'm delighted! In fact, I'm stunned! There's a gentle and virtuous side to Touko-san like in other people after all!"

"... I realized I'm not like others, but I think it's better not to say things like that."

"Sorry, I wasn't thinking. Ah, so that's why you are dressed formally today. It looks very smart; it really suits you. I couldn't recognize you!"

"... My outfit's the same as always, but whatever, I'll accept the compliments."

Touko realized it was useless to say anything and quietly folded things up.

"So don't do anything rash. Even without that sort of thing, that hospital is strange. You will sit here and look after the office, got it?"

At that, the hyperactive employee settled down.

"Strange, you mean that hospital?"

"Yeah. There's a Bounded Field against something placed there. It seems like another Magus was meddling with things. Of course, the target wasn't Ryougi Shiki. If it was, they

wouldn't have held off for two years."It was a whopper of a lie, but the confident way in which she spoke meant he didn't suspect a thing.

"... Uhm, a Bounded Field. That's like the second floor of this building, isn't it?"

"Yep. A Bounded Field is something of different levels which isolates a specified area. They range from ones that create an actual wall to ones that cover the target area with an invisible wall. The highest ranking Bounded Fields are a form of subliminal coercion that goes, 'nothing has been done but no one approaches'. It's the same as this building. If you put in place a suggestion like 'anyone who does not have a reason to come here will not be conscious of this place', a Bounded Field will be formed which will continue to exist without anyone noticing. A Bounded Field that just mimics another world and makes people realize that something is wrong is the worst of the worst."

The protection of her Workshop was an abnormality that didn't seem abnormal. It was thanks to a Bounded Field, that everyone ignored it and just passed by although it was on the map. It made a world where a preeminent Magus lived appear to be just like any other neighboring house.

But this new employee had unconsciously broken that Bounded Field. This building was something he shouldn't have been able to find unless he knew Aozaki Touko, yet he had easily found it.

Well, that was also the reason she hired him.

"... So, is that hospital's Bounded Field a dangerous one?"

"Try listening to what someone is saying. A Bounded Field itself does no harm. The words Bounded Field originate from Buddhism. A Bounded Field is always something that isolates an area from the outside world, although it has somehow come to represent technique by which a Magus protects his or her body.

"Understand? I said this just before, but the best Bounded Fields don't feel weird to a normal person. Let's call it 'an idea which forces itself on the unconscious mind.' The best of the best reach the stage of 'disconnection of space'; but to go that far you are looking at Magicians rather than Magi. Currently there's only one Magician in this country, so basically that kind of Bounded Field just can't be formed.

"Well, nothing that powerful was formed, but the Bounded Field placed around that hospital is pretty complex. It's good enough that even I didn't notice it for a while. There's a Bounded Field specialist that I know, this skill is at the same level as that guy's.

"... Well, among Bounded Field specialists there are a lot of philosophers. Most of them are well distanced from anything accompanied by violence, so it should be alright for now."

That was true, there was no danger in the Bounded Field itself. The problem was, what was happening within the bounds of that space cut off from the rest of the world. That hospital's Bounded Field was aimed inwards, not outwards. In short, it was the type that made no one notice what was happening within the building no matter what was going on. For example, if a room was to explode in the middle of the night, not one person would be woken up by the noise.

Touko didn't tell him that. Saying something about the time creeping along, she walked out with her eyes focused on the clock.

His voice caught on her narrow back.

"Touko-san. Take good care of Shiki."

"Alright," Touko said, waving. He asked her another trivial question even though she didn't even bother to turn around.

"Ah, yes. Touko-san, who's that Bounded Field specialist you know?"

Tock, Touko's feet stop.

She fell into thought for a second, then swung her head around to pierce him with her eyes as she replied.

"Well, if he's a Bounded Field specialist, he's a monk of course."

3

Around six days had passed since Touko was invited to the hospital as a provisional doctor. Every time Touko passed on the news to her employee that Ryougi Shiki's condition was improving every day, she couldn't help but have one little worry.

That was, whether or not the Ryougi Shiki of the present and the Ryougi Shiki of the past were the same to another person.

"Taking physiotherapy twice a day and getting a CT scan are like work for her. You'll be able to see her on the day she's released, so just wait a little more."

Having come back from the hospital, Touko smoothed out her orange necktie and sat on the desk.

The time of evening with summer just ahead; the red blaze of the sunset dyed the otherwise unlit interior of the office a dark orange.

"Physiotherapy twice a day? Will Shiki be okay with just that? She's been asleep for two years."

"They say they moved her joints for her even though she was asleep. On top of that, physiotherapy isn't exercise. Five minutes a day is sufficient. Originally, the term rehabilitation wasn't a medical term, but meant the recovery of one's dignity as a human. That's how Ryougi Shiki, who has been lying around until now, has been able to regain the feeling that she is human. The body's recovery... well, that's a different story."

Touko lit the cigarette she was holding in her mouth, cutting off the conversation for a while.

"But you know, the problem isn't of the body, but rather the mind. That kid is becoming different from the Ryougi Shiki of before."

"Is it... Memory loss?"

As if he had prepared for such a thing, he hesitantly said something stupid.

"Hmm, I wonder.... I believe her personality itself is the same as before. There hasn't been a change to Ryougi Shiki herself. What has changed is Shiki. I don't know if this will come as a shock to you."

"I'm plenty used to this kind of thing by now. Please explain fully. Shiki... what's happened to her?"

"Mmm, to tell the truth. She's completely empty. Shiki, who until now had always carried around another person inside of her... SHIKI no longer exists. No, she must be unsure whether or not she's even Shiki or SHIKI. When she woke up, SHIKI was already gone from inside her. Through his loss, her mind has become a blank space. Maybe that kid won't be able to stand the empty space... Her heart is empty. Like a hole, it's completely open. Even the air passes through like the wind."

"What do you mean, SHIKI's gone? How come?"

"He probably died in Shiki's stead. However it happened, Ryougi Shiki died in that accident two years ago. You might misunderstand since she's somehow still alive, but just assume for a minute that she died. Ryougi Shiki came back to life as a new entity inside the body of Ryougi Shiki. The Shiki of now, the Shiki of the past, and the Shiki of the present derived from those memories are nothing but strangers. No one can accept another person's history as their own. That child will perhaps be spending her nights with the thought that 'I'm still not myself'."

"... Another person? So, Shiki can't remember the things that have happened?"

"No, she remembers. At present she is definitely the Shiki you know. The reason she's still alive is because she had the equal but separate personalities of Shiki and SHIKI. Ryougi Shiki suffered a death of the mind due to the accident. Let's say that SHIKI accepted the role of dying at that time. So, although she should have died at that moment, Shiki was still there in her brain, and as a consequence, her mind didn't die. Shiki has been asleep because of the death of Ryougi Shiki, but since it was SHIKI that died, she was able to survive.

"And so, she was in a coma for two years, and although her body kept functioning, she didn't grow – all because she was dead yet still alive. But the revived her is different from the past Shiki in the details. It's not so bad as to be called memory loss, but she probably won't be able to bring to mind any memories unless she needs to. You can't say it's another person or that it's a complete stranger, but she's now different from the Shiki you've known until now. A third personality which is an amalgam of the personalities of Shiki and SHIKI, it would be most appropriate to accept her as such."

... That was what she said, but in reality such a thing could not happen.

As long as Shiki was Ryougi, there was no need to mix with SHIKI, who was her other half, and Shiki wouldn't be able to fill the hole left by SHIKI's absence by herself.

Avoiding any reference to that fact, Touko continued talking.

"Even if she's revived as a wholly different person, she's still Ryougi Shiki. No matter how little confidence you have in the fact that you are you. that child is still Ryougi Shiki. Right now she probably can't even feel that she's alive, but the time will come when she will

accept that she is Shiki. A rose is born as a rose. It doesn't become a different flower just because the ground it's on and the water it receives change."

"So don't be so hung up over it all," she added in a whisper.

"Eventually, an empty hole has to be filled. She will have to build a new self, not based on her memories of the past, but through her experiences in the present. That's a shrine that no one can help her build. It's not something another person should meddle in. In short, all you have to do is treat her as you've always done. Oh, and it seemed like they were going to release her pretty soon."

Throwing the burnt-down cigarette stub out the window, Touko raised her arms and straightened her back.

Crick, crick, crack. The sound her bones made could be clearly heard.

"I knew I shouldn't have done something I'm not used to. The cigarettes tasted so bad that I was about to go crazy."

She talked while letting out a long sigh, as if she was tired of the world.

/4

As the usual morning check-up had ended, I realized that it was now the twentieth. Which meant that it had now been seven days since I woke up. My body had also recovered without a hitch, so I was going to be released tomorrow. The bandages over my two eyes; I would also be able to take them off tomorrow morning.

Seven days... A week.

I hadn't gained much during this period of time.

I had lost so many things that I wasn't even sure what I had lost.

My parents, Akitaka; they were probably the same as they were before. But to me, they felt like different people. The fading away of all that once surrounded me was something that couldn't be helped, since the one called Ryougi Shiki had changed.

I touched the bandages covering my eyes.

The only thing I had gained in exchange for everything I had lost was this.

I had experienced「death」for two years while still alive. My body had changed so that I could now view such formless concepts.

The first thing I had seen upon waking up from the coma was not the surprised nurse running towards me... it was the line wrapping around her throat. People, walls, even the air itself... There were incredibly fine lines visible on everything. Those lines were always moving and irregular. But I suffered from an obsession with the idea, that death would spread out at any moment from those individual concepts and pull me in. I had seen a hallucination in which the approaching nurse crumbled into pieces starting from the line in her neck.

When I understood what those lines were I crushed my two eyes with my own hands.

My hands hadn't moved in two years and just clenching them brought on agonizing pain, but I still moved my arms. Luckily or unluckily, my arms were still weak and I was stopped by the doctors in the process of destroying my eyes. They decided that it was just a sudden impulse brought on by the turbidity of my mind and weren't particularly interested in why I had tried to crush my eyes.

"Are my eyes... going to recover soon?"

I didn't want that. That kind of world, I never wanted to see it again.

A world where nothing exists. While I was「there」, I was content and at peace.

I couldn't believe it now. Remembering that world after I had woken up; I had thought about it and there couldn't be anything more pathetic than that world. That darkness, even if it was just a nightmare I dreamed while sleeping, I couldn't stand the thought of falling into that place again.

And, these two eyes of mine that were connected to that place; I brought my fingertips to my eyes.

After that, all that was left was to stab my eyes with those fingertips, as cleanly as if I was swinging a bamboo sword.

"Just a second, hold up. You give up too quickly."

Suddenly there was a noise.

I turned my senses towards the door.

The thing that was there was... What was it?

Without a sound the someone came closer, coming right up to the bed where I was reposed.

"Is it the 'Mystic Eyes of Death Perception'? It's too wasteful to destroy that, Shiki. Especially seeing as anything you can see, will be seen even if you ruin your eyes. You see, a curse is something that comes back if you throw it away."

"Are you, human?"

My question provoked a reaction which sounded like somebody trying not to laugh.

Whoosh, I heard the sound of a lighter being flicked and a flame springing out.

"I'm a Magus. I came here to teach you how to use those eyes of yours."

That familiar female voice... This someone was without a doubt the counselor.

"What do you mean, how to use these eyes...?"

"Well, it will only be a little better than now, but I suppose it's better than nothing. Your Mystic Eyes, which can conceive another's death by just looking, are the first since the time of the Celtic Gods. Erasing them is too wasteful."

"It's called Balor." The lady added some incomprehensible words.

"Mystic Eyes are normally the result of you bringing about some kind of augmentation effect for your eyes through spiritual surgery. But in your case, I think they came about naturally. An ability you originally had was brought to the fore by the accident. By the sounds of it, it seemed that the child called Shiki was always seeing to the heart of everything."

... She talked as if she knew.

Actually, as she said, Shiki had always been gazing at a far-off location. I think that even while looking at a person, she saw not the exterior, but that person's core. Although Shiki herself wasn't aware of it.

“Well, you see, that was definitely a control mechanism Shiki used unconsciously. You shouldn’t try to look at exteriors. Every object has flaws. The fancy of wishing everything could be taken apart and remade only exists because there’s no such thing as a perfect object.

“Your eyes can see those flaws, as if they were a microscope. Your spiritual sight is too strong. You can see those lines that are invisible to us, and that brain of yours that was in contact with death for so long can even understand what they are. In conclusion, you can see death. Not only see it, but you can even touch it. A living organism’s lines of death will keep changing position as long as it’s alive. The ability to see those lines clearly, there’s not much difference between that and Mystic Eyes that can kill with a look. If you must stab those eyes, I will receive them instead. I will pay you any price you name.”

“... Did you say I will be able to see this even if my eyes can’t see? In that case, there’s no reason for me to stab them.”

“Well, yes. You can’t lead a normal life anyway. Leave your agonizing at that, Ryougi Shiki. Open your eyes a bit. You are originally a human of my kind. If you are, abandon any dreams you have of living like everyone else.”

“...”

... That one sentence; in some ways it was conclusive.

But I felt as if I shouldn’t accept it for some reason.

I replied with the strongest rebuttal I could manage at this time.

“Something as pitiful as an urge to live on, I don’t have any such thing.”

“Heh. Is that because you’ve emptied your mind? But you don’t want to die, do you? Because you’ve seen that world. Since you’ve reached a state of realization that not even the Kabbalists of Keter can reach, you gorged brat.

“Do you understand? Your problem’s simple. Okay, you’ve revived as another person. So what? It’s just that SHIKI isn’t here. I guess since you and SHIKI were definitely a set, his absence alone would mean that you are a whole different person. Even if you are the very embodiment of Shiki, I understand that you are different from before.

“But what I’m saying is that that’s as far as it goes. Right now you are desperately rejecting death while you have no will to live. You have no reason to live on, but you fear the thing called death. Life or death. Unable to choose either side you are walking a tightrope on the boundary of the two. I suppose it’s enough to empty your mind.”

“... You keep chattering away as if you know everything...”

I glared at the woman. At that moment, without a hint of doubt, my eyes which should be blind caught sight of the woman’s outline and black lines.

「Death」coiled out towards me from the woman’s lines.

“Did you see it? It’s because there are flaws that they move with just that much contact. In the eyes of the idle spirits here, your body is the perfect vessel. If you don’t wake up you are going to be dragged away and killed.”

By that talk of being dragged away and killed, did she mean that white smoke?

But that thing didn't come around here anymore.

"Idle spirits are nothing more than a part of the soul left behind after death. They don't have a will, so they just wander around. But as they are parts, they keep grouping together to form a whole until they become a ghost. They don't have a will, but basic desires remain. Things like 'I want to return to my former self', or 'I want a human body'.

"A hospital has a lot of idle spirits. They form drifting ghosts and look for a body they can inhabit. Since they are so weak, normal people can't feel them or even come into contact with them. Formless spirits only follow people with paranormal abilities who can perceive them. Practitioners who make a living out of talking to ghosts protect their egos with a shell, so it's very rare for them to be taken down by a drifting ghost.

"On the other hand. They will probably latch onto a person with an empty heart, say you for example, pretty easily."

There was a hint of contempt in her voice as she spoke.

So, was that why that smoke came to me? If that was the case, why didn't it possess me? If it had tried to become my kernel, I wouldn't have resisted.

"Pathetic. Even the Rune's protection is meaningless like this. That's it, as expected, this doesn't suit you. Just do as you will after this."

After speaking so venomously the lady distanced herself from the bed. Just before she had shut the door to the room, that lady left behind one last remark.

"But you know, did SHIKI really die for nothing, Ryougi Shiki?"

I couldn't reply to that.

Really, that lady only touched the subjects I was avoiding and left them behind like thorns.

◇

It was night.

Darkness surrounded me. Tonight there wasn't even the sound of anyone walking through the corridors.

In the midst of this night, which was as peaceful as a silent lake deep within a mountain range, I was recalling my conversation with that lady.

No, just that last undeniable question. For what reason did SHIKI die in Shiki's stead? SHIKI wasn't here to reply.

SHIKI, who was no longer here.

Exactly why had he disappeared?

What had he disappeared in exchange for?

SHIKI, who had liked to dream.

He was always asleep. But on that rainy night, he had abandoned even that action and died. The self I could no longer meet, the self I could never have met in the first place.

SHIKI, who was always myself.

My consciousness settled down. In an attempt to reach the conclusion he reached I looked back through my memories.

Creak, the door to the room opened.

Following that, slow footsteps approached me.

Was it a nurse? No, the time was already past midnight.

If it was a visitor, it could only be–

At that moment a human hand wrapped around my neck.

The cold hand squeezed as if to break my neck just like that.

(/5)

"Aaaah."

The pressure on her neck made Shiki cry out in pain.

I couldn't breathe. My throat was getting crushed. At this rate my neck was going to be twisted off before I had any problems breathing.

Shiki stared at the opponent with her unseeing eyes.

... It was not, a human.

No, the body was that of a human, but the person who was choking the life out of her was already dead. A corpse was moving by itself and attacking Shiki who was on the bed.

The pressure on her neck did not ease. Shiki resisted, holding the attacker's arms with both hands but the difference in strength was obvious.

More than anything, wasn't this what she wanted?

"..."

Shiki stopped breathing and removed her hands from the corpse's arm.

If I was going to be killed like this, it was okay; so I could just give up. After all there was no meaning to my life. To exist when you can't even feel that you are alive, there could be no greater agony than that. To just disappear was natural providence, even thoughts like that had come into my mind.

My strength was slipping away.

Although only a few seconds would have flowed past the time seemed to pass very slowly. It stretched like a rubber band.

The corpse squeezed down on Shiki's throat. The fingers without heat felt as if they were made of wood and dug into her neck.

This murder had no feeling to it, and from the start there had been no sign of a will behind it either.

The flesh of my neck tore. The flow of blood was proof that I was alive.

By dying, dying like SHIKI, I was throwing that away.

... Throwing it away? That phrase made Shiki regain consciousness.

A sudden question formed; would he have died so willingly?

... That's right, I hadn't thought of that.

Whatever the reason, would his will have been completely behind his decision?

There was no way he would have wanted to die. Death was such a lonely and worthless thing. Death was such a black and unpleasant thing. Death, would have been scarier than anything else!

"No."

All of the sudden, Shiki's body was revitalized.

Grabbing the corpse's neck with both hands she pushed the opponent's belly with one foot from her squashed position and–

"I don't want to fall into that place again!"

–Kicked the lump of meat with all her might.

A slipping sound, slipping from the bloody flesh, the corpse's hands released Shiki's neck.

Shiki got off the bed.

The corpse leaped at Shiki straight away and the two got tangled up in the unlit hospital room.

The corpse's body was that of an adult human, two heads bigger than Shiki. No matter how she struggled Shiki was pushed back. With both arms trapped Shiki slowly pulled back. It was a small hospital room so she soon reached the wall. *Whack*, the moment she touched the wall Shiki had made up her mind.

She had voluntarily fled so that there would be a window behind her. She calculated how she would fall back. The problem was... how many floors up was it?

"Don't hesitate."

Scolding herself she removed the arms that were holding the corpse back.

The corpse stretched its hands towards her neck, but faster than that, she opened the window with her freed hands and the two fell out as if they were getting tangled up.

◇

The instant I began to fall. I grabbed the corpse's head and reversed who was above and who was below. A spin, after the arrangement changed so that the corpse was facing the ground and I was on top riding it, I had jumped by sense alone.

The ground already seemed to be right in front of my nose.

The corpse's body got hurled against the ground, and I had been jumping horizontally to the ground before my body could roll over. Scattering the dirt of the hospital lawn, I landed with both arms and legs.

The corpse fell on the hospital's flower bed, and it so happened that I slipped and fell on the lawn which was a fair distance from there. I had just executed a miraculous fall, the likes of which I hadn't done once in the dojo, but the weight of falling three floors was paralyzing my body.

Around me were only the trees of the garden and the silent night, where not a sound could be heard even when it was like this.

My body didn't move and I could only feel the pain in my neck.

Ahhhh, I was still alive.

And that corpse hadn't died yet.

If I didn't want to die then what I needed to do was obvious. Kill before I was killed. Just by thinking that the emptiness in my heart disappeared. At the same time a lot of feelings were unlocked.

"Really, what is this?" I grumbled.

Through this sort of thing I opened my eyes.

Yes, the me that was brooding for so long seemed like an idiot.

When the answer was so simple.

◇

"How surprising. Are you a cat?"

There was a voice that came from right behind Shiki. Shiki was valiantly enduring the shock of the landing, without turning to look.

"You? Why are you at a place like this?"

The self-titled Magus-counselor answered Shiki's question as if it wasn't important.

"Because I was keeping watch. I was standing guard thinking they would come around tonight or so. See, you don't have any time to rest. A hospital definitely has some strong corpses. They can't get into a live body so they decided to show their abilities. After infecting a corpse they were going to make you theirs after killing you.""Whatever's going on, it's all the fault of that weird rock you gave me."

Shiki talked as she leaned against the ground. In her words there was not even a hint of the hesitation she had shown until now.

"Oh, you knew? Well, yes. This is definitely my mistake. I placed a Bounded Field around the room so spirits couldn't get in, but I never expected they would go and obtain a body in order to break it. Normally they don't have that sort of intelligence."

"Haha," the magus laughed as if she was amused.

"Really? In that case you do something."

"Okay."

Tock, and the magus lifted her finger.

How would it have looked if Shiki could see?

The magus wrote in the air with her cigarette flame. The writing was reflected on the corpse as if it was being projected.

The far-off country's writing was composed only of straight lines, it was the engraved sorcery of a far-off world. The circuit called a Rune moved and in an instant, the body of the corpse lying collapsed on the ground began to burn.

"It's too weak with just the F Ansuz in the air." The Magus mumbled.

The flame covered corpse slowly stood up.

Somehow moving with two completely broken legs the corpse dragged itself towards Shiki as if moving by muscle power alone.

The flames soon went out.

"Hey, you charlatan."

"Don't shout like that. It's very difficult to destroy something the size of a human. A living person is finished if you just burn the heart, but you can't do that with the living dead. They are dead so it doesn't matter whether they lose a head or an arm. You realize that you can't get rid of a human itself with something that has the firepower of a gun right? To stop that thing you would have to bring the firepower of a crematorium... Or a monk of high moral integrity."

"That's enough showing off. Whatever the problem I think it's too much for you to handle."

It seemed like Shiki's comment severely hurt the magus's self-respect.

"It's too much for you to handle as well. A corpse is already dead so you can't kill it. Coincidentally, while you can kill a person with what you have you can't get rid of them. Let's run away for now."

The magus began to retreat but Shiki didn't move.

It was not that the descent from the third floor broke her legs.

She was, just smiling.

"Whether it's dead or whatever, that corpse is 'alive'. In that case–"

She got up from her leaning position that was similar to the bent-back posture of a predator leaping at its prey.

Shhhk, she touched her neck. Blood was still flowing. The flesh was torn. There was a mark where she was strangled, but she was still alive.

And that was an ecstatic sensation.

"–whatever it is, I'm going to kill it."

Shrrrg, she unwrapped the bandages covering her eyes. In the darkness the Mystic Eyes of Death Perception were awakened.

Two delicate legs kicked the ground.

The corpse reached out with its arms at Shiki who was rushing towards it. Narrowly slipping past it she ripped apart the corpse with one hand as if she was feeling for the line visible to her eyes.

Shiki's nails passed through in an even cut from the right shoulder to the left hip.

Thanks to that her finger bone had broke but the corpse's wound was much greater.

Like a puppet, it collapsed because the strings controlling it had been cut, the corpse fell to the ground. One arm though apparently still had strings attached and the corpse which had slowly crawled over to her grabbing Shiki's ankle.

Shiki didn't hesitate and ground the arm under her foot.

"A dead body shouldn't appear before me," said Shiki and then she laughed silently.

I was alive.

It was like my state of mind until now was a lie, to think that I could so clearly feel that I was alive...

"Shiki!"

Calling Shiki loudly the Magus threw something towards her, a non-decorated silver-colored knife.

Shiki grabbed the knife, which was stuck in the ground, and looked at the still moving corpse as if it were a wart. And just like that, she stabbed the corpse's neck with the knife.

The corpse quickly stopped moving, but then.

"Idiot, if you are going to stab it stab the main body itself!"

The disastrous result appeared faster than the Magus's scolding. As soon as Shiki had stabbed the corpse smoke popped out of the dead body. Becoming desperate as if it wanted to run away the smoke disappeared into Shiki's body.

"___"

Collapse, Shiki's knees had limply hit the ground.

Unable to infect her till now because she was conscious, the spirit took advantage of the instant when Shiki lost her sense of self because to the excitement of killing, and invaded her body.

"You fumbled the finish, fool."

The Magus came running over. But Shiki's body stopped that with one hand. A stopping gesture, at that signal the Magus stopped and stood still.

Shiki's body grabbed the hilt of the knife with both hands and pointed the blade at her own chest.

The blank eyes regained their strong resolve.

Lips tightly shut, she bit down on her teeth.

The tip of the knife touched her chest.

Her will and her body, they had not been taken over by something so weak as a wandering spirit.

“Now I won’t lose you.”

Her mumbling wasn’t directed at anyone else, it was directed at herself. Shiki perceived the death of the thing crawling around inside of her.

What would being stabbed was Ryougi Shiki’s body. But, it would only kill that collective entity that shouldn’t exist. Shiki was confident that she would not receive a wound.

And so she gathered her strength.

“I am killing the weak me.”

I wouldn’t hand over Ryougi Shiki over to something like you.

The knife slid easily into her chest.

◇

She pulled out the silver-colored knife. No blood was flowing, she only had the pain to tell her that she had stabbed her chest.

Shing, Shiki swung the knife as if she was shaking the dirty soul off the blade.“Hey, you said that you would teach me the way to use these eyes.”

Her way of speaking now began to settle into a pattern. The Magus nodded her head in satisfaction at this change.

“There are conditions, but I’ll teach you how to use your Death Perception. In return help me with my work. I just lost the one I bossed around so I need a new pair of feet and hands right now.”

Shiki didn’t even turn around to face the Magus and quietly said, “So that’s how it is.”

“If I do that can I kill people?”

It was an utterance that made even the Magus shiver.

“Ahhh, of course.”

“In that case I’ll do it. Use me as you will. Since I didn’t have any objectives apart from that anyway.”

Shiki with her melancholic voice, slowly sank to the ground. Maybe it was because of her exhaustion from the recent events, or maybe it was because of the violent act of stabbing her own chest.

The Magus picked up her body and gazed at her sleeping face. It was a face too ambiguous to call sleep, a frozen face as if she was dead.

The Magus gazed upon that face for a long while. Before long she mumbled some words.

"You say you don't have any objectives? That's tragic, you know, you are still confused."

The Magus talked as if she resented Shiki's peaceful appearance.

"The fact that you are empty means that you can fill that emptiness with as much as you want. What a blessing, where's a better future than that?"

Mumbling something like that, the Magus clicked her tongue because she was embarrassed at herself for saying such sincere words... When they were things she had forgotten for such a long time.

/The Hollow Shrine

I think of the time when my consciousness had fallen into dreaming and settled down.

SHIKI who had disappeared; a self who was another person. What had he disappeared in exchange for, what had he sacrificed his life to protect?

Going through Ryougi Shiki's memories, I realized what.

Probably, SHIKI protected his dream. His dream that he would live happily.

Was that dream that friend from class? Or was that young man the person he wanted to be as a man? That was something I can no longer find out.

SHIKI disappeared so he wouldn't lose both him and Shiki.

Leaving me, with this deep solitude.

...

The morning sunlight entered the room. At that warmth, my eyes, which had recovered their sight, opened.

I was sleeping in the bed. That incident last night would have been taken care of by the Magus. No, that kind of thing was unimportant. Rather than things like that, let me think of him for now.

Still in that prone position, I laid there without even moving my head and breathed in the morning air.

How long had it been since I had woken up to the morning sunlight? Thin but strong, the bright light colored over the darkness in my heart.

This strange life I had just taken hold of, and... the other me that would not return, they melted together and disappeared into the light. The existence of Ryougi SHIKI and his dreams... were disappearing.

If I could cry, I wanted to shed tears for him. But my eyes were dry. I have decided to cry only once, and it was not right to cry about this.

Now that I could no longer go back, I'll never regret it again.

Like this darkness, opening up in front of the morning sunlight.

To disappear cleanly like this, it was what he would have wanted.

◇

"Hello, Shiki."

A voice came from next to me.

I just twisted my head to the side.

Standing there was the friend I knew a long time ago. The black-rimmed glasses, even his unstyled black hair, he really hadn't changed.

"Do you, know me... ?"

His voice was strangely shaky.

... Ahhh, I already knew. I knew that you were always waiting for Shiki, and that only you were always there, protecting me.

"Kokutou Mikiya. Sounds like a French poet."

At my mumbling voice, he smiled brightly. Like when we met at school after just one day, that brightly.

How much effort was hidden in that simple smile, I couldn't know. Only, it seemed he remembered that promise as well.

"It's great that the weather is nice today. Perfect to get out of hospital."

With tears brimming in his eyes, he spoke as naturally as he could.

To the empty me, that was warmer than anything. A smiling face over a crying face, that was what this friend chose.

To acknowledge isolation rather than be isolated, that was what SHIKI chose.

Although I haven't chosen either side yet.

"... Ahhh. Are there things that don't disappear?"

His smiling face that seemed to become one with the soft sunlight, I just blankly gazed upon it.

Until I was sick of it.

I know that the hole punched in my chest couldn't be filled with things like that, but right now, I didn't want to do anything else. Because...

... His soft, smiling face.

That was the same face as the one in my memories.

The Hollow Shrine (garan-no-dou) / Fin

Intermission

◇

On the hospital bed, which was no different from any ordinary day and would never be different, her weak body lay shivering uncontrollably.

The door, through which there was no chance of a visitor coming in, then opened. Without a sound but with a presence unmatched by anyone else, that person came to visit.

The visitor was a man, he was tall and had a wide build. His grim face was perpetually shadowed like that of a philosopher attempting to solve an eternally unsolvable and fundamental question.

Most likely, this person always looked like this.

The man watched her with grim and sincere eyes.

They had that feeling of closure to the point of terror. It was a sense of restriction that made one wonder if the room had somehow been put into a vacuum. It was to the point where even she, who did not fear death but only the shortness of life, began to feel the wariness of death from this person's presence.

"Are you Fujou Kirie?"

As expected, there was an echo of agony somewhere in his heavy voice.

Looking with her sightless eyes, Fujou Kirie replied to the man.

"Are you Father's friend?"

The man didn't give an answer, but Fujou Kirie was sure that this was the person who had paid the hospital fees of someone like herself, someone who did not have a family to do so.

"What did you come for? I can't do anything." Kirie said as she shook, the man didn't even bat an eyelash.

"I've come to grant your wish. Don't you want another body that you can move freely?"

In those revoltingly unrealistic words was a hint of magical energy, or at least it felt so to Fujou Kirie. Because she accepted that if it was this man, he could carry out that which he had promised without any resistance to the idea.

After a brief contemplation of the offer, she nodded her shaking neck.

The man nodded. His right hand rose.

Kirie's long cherished dream and a nightmare that would never end; in one wave of his hand, he granted her both.

But before that, she asked him one question.

"What are you?"

The man replied as if the question was inconsequential.

◇

Freed from the ruined basement bar, she had set off on her way home with feeble steps.

The rhythm of her breathing was strange and she was dizzy. She couldn't walk properly without supporting herself on something.

The cause was probably the scary thing that had happened to her earlier. For whatever reason, one of the five youths, who had been getting ready to humiliate her as usual, had struck her back with a baseball bat.

It hadn't hurt – no, she had never known pain in the first place. It was just... heavy. The chill radiating out from her back contorted her face into a frown, and the knowledge that she had been hit in the back distorted her mind. Still, she hadn't shed any tears and had meant to return to the student dorms after enduring the hours of abuse.

But today that road seemed to stretch forever.

On top of that, her body wasn't listening to her.

The reflection in a shop window, that she happened to have looked into, showed her a deathly pale face. She didn't feel the pain, so even if she was injured she wasn't able to tell what kind of injury it was. She had been struck in the back, but all she knew was that she had been hit; she had no idea that her backbone had been broken by the blow.

She was clueless, but right now she could at least tell that her body was suffering.

She couldn't go to the hospital. The neighborhood clinic she goes to without her parents' knowledge was too far from here, and even if she called them, they'll want to know how she was hurt. She couldn't lie very well, so she wasn't confident that she would be able to explain away any of the doctor's questions.

"What should I do? What should I do?"

While gasping for breath, she began to fall to the ground.

But a huge man's arm stopped her fall.

Surprised, she lifted her face. There was a serious-looking man there.

"Are you Asagami Fujino?"

The man's voice did not allow for any denial. Just then, for the first time in her life, she – Asagami Fujino – felt a wariness that froze her whole body.

"There's a crack in your vertebra. You can't go home like this."

With a magic-like freshness, the statement that she couldn't go home gripped her mind.

She didn't want that to be the case. Her home; she wanted to be able to go back to the dorm. Because right now, that was the only place Asagami Fujino could rest.

With pleading eyes, Fujino looked up at the man. Although it was summer, he wore a coat-like cloak. His cloak and the clothes he was wearing beneath it were all black. The flapping cloak and the man's piercing eyes, for some reason, brought to mind a monk from a temple.

"Do you want me to heal you?"

A voice with a hypnotic strength could be heard.

Fujino did not even feel that she was nodding.

"All right. I'll heal the abnormality in your body."

Without any change of expression, the man put his right hand against Fujino's back.

But before that, she asked him just one thing.

"What, are you..?"

The man replied as if the question was inconsequential.

◇

But before that, he asked just one thing.

"Who are you?"

The man in the black coat replied without even blinking.

"A Magus, Araya Souren."

Like a god's proclamation, his words rang out heavily across the back alley.

5
Paradox Spiral
Paradox Paradigm.

When I was young, that piece of metal was my treasure.
Bulky, rough, small, only one function.
The silver piece was cold, and to my memory, holding it tightly hurt me.
Click, and it spun the beginning of the day half way.
Click, and it spun the end of the day half way.
The young me felt honored whenever I heard the sound.
However, whenever I heard the sound, I could feel my eyes water.
Click, click, once at the beginning, once at the end.
It would circle around a day, and it repeated circling.
Circle and circle, never tiring, never complaining.
Half joy, half sorrow. The days it circled without a surprise were like a barber pole.
But the endless days ended without a warning.
The silver piece was only cold ––––– no joy.
If I held it tightly, I bled ––––– no sorrow.
Obviously. A piece of metal is a piece of metal. There is no fantasy.
When I became an eight year old who knew reality, the piece of metal was glittery no more.
Then I realized, that becoming a grown-up is selling fantasy for wisdom.
Because I thought doing so was so premature, I thought that fact was something to be proud of.

/0

Autumn had been short this year. With November having passed and winter about to come, Officer Akimi had encountered a strange ghost story.

At his workplace, which was second only to a hospital in the number of deaths encountered, there was no seasonal time for ghost stories. It was normal that such stories come up year-round with no end.

Naturally, Officer Akimi wouldn't have bat an eyelash at most stories, but this story was of a different level than the others. Anyway, something was recorded in an official report that could only be interpreted as a ghost story. The reason that this story, which normally no one would be interested in, had gotten into his hands was because his love for mysteries was famous.

The event was concluded to be a false report made up by a robber who was wrong in the head.

The contents were rather simple. At the end of October, at an apartment complex close to the heart of the city, there had been a robbery. The inhabitants of the building had been away at the time, and among the ten high-class apartments in the complex, the robbed house was the most exquisite.

The robber was someone with a previous criminal record. He was not the type to plan beforehand, but rather someone who suddenly decided to take the opportunity when a house was empty. It was said that the robber went into an empty apartment complex, took a quick look around, and then went into an apartment where it looked like no one was home.

The problem was that a few minutes later, the robber ran to the nearest police station and asked for help.

The robber was in shock and couldn't explain things properly, but he had found everyone in that apartment had been left dead. The policeman who was there followed the robber back to the complex. However, contrary to what the robber had said, the members of the apartment were all alive and enjoying a nice family dinner.

The robber was perplexed, and when the policeman found out that he had broken into an empty house, he was arrested.

"Geez, what is this?"

Having briefly skimmed the report, Officer Akimi muttered to himself on his squeaky chair. It was definitely a strange story, but it really wasn't especially worth remembering.

The report said that the robber hadn't used alcohol or drugs, and there wasn't anything wrong with his mental condition. To get arrested while making a false report, it was definitely a rare event.

He didn't have time to waste on such a boring and closed case, it was a stretch to even call it a case.

Right now, he was as busy as he was three years ago. In fact, the current disappearance cases were enough to make him suspect that this was the second coming of the case three years ago. It was not very well known, but since October, four people had already disappeared. It was getting more and more difficult to keep the families of the victims quiet.

In such a situation, he couldn't waste time with a story like this. He couldn't, but for some reason, it appealed to him.

"Dammit."

Muttering to himself, he had picked up the phone. The place he was calling was the station where the case had been reported. The phone was answered immediately, and Officer Akimi started to ask detailed questions about the case.

He asked whether they had checked with the neighbors of the "family of corpses" the robber had mentioned, and whether there had been any inconsistencies in the robber's description of the bodies.

As expected, the reply was that they had indeed checked with the neighbors, besides the fact that it was completely false, there was nothing of note about the robber's description of the bodies.

He thanked the person and hung up. Just then, there was a noise behind his back.

"What are you doing, Daisuke? Hurry up, a second body has been found."

"Already? By the way you say it, I'm assuming it was also left partly eaten?"

Officer Akimi stood up and quickly switched his train of thought. No matter how much this case bothered him, it was already closed and not something he needed to take care of urgently. Because of this, even Officer Akimi, who was known to be supremely eccentric, forgot about this case.

/1 (Paradox Spiral, 1)

Even though October had just arrived, the roads were already chilly. The time was a little before ten at night.

The wind was cold, and the darkness of night was oppressive.

Normally the roads should have been plenty bright at this time, but tonight, they were so gloomy they'd make one wonder whether or not the clocks were slow by an hour. The cold sky, from which it wouldn't be odd to see snow fall, made one feel that the winter was arriving too quickly.

Maybe it was because of that, but in front of this normally busy station there was none of the usual liveliness. The people coming out of the station were all wearing heavy overcoats and going straight home without stopping anywhere.

The thing called a home was a warm resting place, no matter how small it was. On a chilly day like this everyone quickened their feet in order to hurry home.

The flowing people. The non-existent heat. The especially dark city streets.

A boy was vacantly looking at such a scene.

Next to a soda machine just beyond the street in front of the station. Sitting there as if hiding, the boy's gaze did not look normal. This boy was hugging his legs, it would be impossible to tell his gender from just a quick look.

He had a delicate face and a slender body. His dyed-red hair looked like it might be curly and it had a bad texture. He looked sixteen, maybe seventeen years old. His eyes that lacked focus were nice and slender, and if he were wearing girl's clothing, he could have easily been confused as being a girl.

Even the clothing on this boy, whose teeth were clattering, was strange. Besides a dirty pair of jeans, he only had on a large deep blue blazer over his body. Under the jacket he was bare.

As if he was resisting the cold, or maybe something else, his teeth clattered and made noise.

How long had he been here like this?

Even though fewer and fewer people were coming out of the station, a group of youths had surrounded the boy.

"Hey, Tomoe."

One of the youths spoke, with a hint of contempt. The boy with the red hair did not reply.

"...Enjou. You brat, don't ignore me."

The youth forcefully grabbed the boy's jacket and pulled him up.

The one who spoke was about the same age as the boy. Indeed, around him were a group of five boys, all about the same age as him.

"What is it? Are we strangers now that you quit school? Oh, since Tomoe-chan is a working man now can he no longer interact with children?"

Ahaha, laughter erupted.

But the boy, Tomoe, did not respond at all.

With a "hmph," the youth took his hand off Tomoe's jacket and hit his cheek. An impact with a *bam*. Then there was a *Clink*, the sound of something hitting the ground.

"___"

"Don't fall asleep, you idiot."

With that the people around him once again started laughing. At that noise the boy Tomoe began to come back to life from a state of shock.

"... Enjou... Tomoe."

He muttered his own name. Tomoe, whose thought process had been stopped, had even forgotten his own name. Muttering his name was like a ritual to restart activity.

Having come to his senses, Tomoe looked at the boy in front of him.

A former classmate and his cohorts.

He remembered them. Pretty regular students, not really delinquents, but they are the type to bother people weaker than them, like himself.

"Oh, you're Aikawa. What are you doing here at a time like this?"

"That's what we should say. I was worried that you might be selling your body. After all Tomoe is a tender girl."

The boy looked around at his comrades, saying "Isn't that right?"

Of course Tomoe was not a girl. When Tomoe was still in high school, due to his slender physique and his name, he was made fun of in that way.

Tomoe did not immediately reply in any way, instead he picked up an empty can.

"Aikawa" he called out the boy's name.

Tomoe roughly pushed the can into that acne-filled face turning towards him. The can was stuck in the boy's mouth. After that, Tomoe hit the can with his palm.

"Ugh."

The boy fell down immediately. The can that he coughed out was smeared with blood. Dumbfounded, the boy's comrades still hadn't moved yet.

They were just thinking that they could earn some money by robbing a former classmate who had quit high school. They were capable of violence, but they never thought that Tomoe would be too.

They couldn't react quickly after having their comrade get hit and falling down.

"Aikawa, you're as stupid as ever."

Saying that, Enjou Tomoe kicked the fallen boy's head. He did so as if he were playing soccer and kicked as hard as he could with the tip of his foot. In contrast to Aikawa's light-hearted tone, Tomoe was acting as if he was trying to kill.

The boy couldn't move any more. Maybe he had fainted or maybe his neck was broken. He couldn't get up due to the pain, Tomoe had made sure before running away.

Instead of running towards the watchful eyes in front of the train station, he dove into a back alley.

Seeing Tomoe's sprint, the others finally understood the situation. The victim they were trying to rob had beaten up a comrade and ran away. Their friend, who had been taken down, was dripping blood from his mouth and down on the ground.

"That bastard, he wasn't even scared? We'll kill him!"

As someone said that, the fury spread to the remaining five members. They started running in order to catch up to him and take their revenge.

...

"'We'll kill him,' eh?"

Hearing their shout, I couldn't help but laugh.

They were serious. But they didn't know what the true meaning of killing was. To think someone who was that unprepared would say "we'll kill him" to somebody who just done what I had done, what a rash an act.

I had just killed someone before coming here.

Squish, squish, squish.

I felt like I was about to throw up, the feeling of stabbing a human returned. As that thought came up, my body started to shake again. My teeth clattered so hard they were about to break, and a storm was going through my head. They didn't know what it meant to kill someone. It was because they didn't know, that they could say something like that.

–In that case, I'll teach it to them.

With my mind cleared, I cracked a smile.

I didn't have a particularly violent personality. I believed in giving out as much as I took, but today was the first time I had made someone faint like that. I was strange tonight… No, if that wasn't right, maybe I wanted to become strange.

Here should be good.

I entered an alley between two buildings, far enough from the main road that you couldn't call for help.

They had caught up to me. No, to be exact, I let them catch up to me.

After stopping at this discreet back alley and after making sure that they were the five who followed me in here; I attacked the first enemy who came forth.

With my palm I hit my opponent's chin. When novices fight it goes back and forth, hitting and getting hit, over and over again. The one who couldn't last as long was the one that got defeated. I knew that if I got into a fight like that, I had no chance of winning. Therefore, if I wanted to win, I had to fight like I want to kill.

I didn't even pay attention to the situation. Before the others could jump in, before I could be surrounded, I had to take care of them one by one.

My first opponent had tried to counter. I was faster. I stabbed his left eye with my finger.

"Uh... Uaaaaahh!"

He screamed in pain. Given this opening, I grabbed his face with all my strength and slammed the back of his head against a wall.

Bang.

With that sound the first guy slowly fell against the wall. Blood came out of his eye socket. The back of his head was leaving a bloodstain on the wall too. Despite all that, he was still alive.

At that horrible sight, the other four guys lost their excitement and just stood there. They may have done some fighting and seen some blood, but this was the first time they'd seen bloodshed in the context of life and death.

At that opening, I jumped at the one closest to me. After hitting him with my palm, I grabbed his hair. I pulled his head down and kicked my knee upwards. I felt his nose break against my kneecap. With that blow, he had lost his will to retaliate.

From there I kneed his face three more times, I slammed down my elbow onto the back of his head. With that impact, I felt a tingle run up my arm from my elbow. The second one was down. My knee that had kept kicking my opponent's face was soaked with his blood.

"Enjou, you bastard!"

Two people were down. With two people incapacitated it seemed the rest of them finally understood what they had gotten into. The three of them came at me all at once, without any reason or leadership. In that case, the outcome was clear. Being alone, I couldn't take on three people at once.

Getting hit and kicked, I was mercilessly slammed against the wall before falling to the ground.

I got hit hard on the cheek, kicked in the stomach. Still, with cold eyes, I could see that they couldn't commit as much violence as I had.

Were these three just going to beat up a person who wasn't resisting?

This violence definitely had no "killing" intent. However, if this kept up, I would eventually die. Even if the impacts were not fatal, they would eventually reach my heart. The fact that I had to wait until then and endure it was the pain of pains.

Look, even without meaning to kill, it's easy for a human to kill another human.

Is that a sin? A killer like me who had a clear killing intent, or killers without it like them who killed by accident; I wondered which was the heavier sin. I kept getting hit while thinking about such things with my dizzy mind.

My face and my whole body had become covered by bruises, and I begun to get used to the pain. They probably had become so used to hitting me that they also couldn't stop.

"You're quite something with that cute face of yours, Enjou!"

At that moment, I was hit in the chest and I started coughing. Either the inside of my mouth was ripped through the beating, or it came from my stomach. Mixed in my saliva was something like blood.

Even though these three people had no such intent, if this continued for a few more seconds, Enjou Tomoe would be dead... I realized just then. That I didn't consider my own life to be very important.

Just as my vision was disappearing, when one of their fists hit one of my eyes, and my consciousness was about to disappear as well. At that very moment–

Clatter.

I heard a beautiful noise. Completely different from the dullness of hitting a person, a small and marble-like noise.

The three stopped their movements and turned towards the direction of the noise... the narrow entrance that this person had used to get into this alleyway. I barely opened my swollen eyes and looked at the person.

"___"

My mind, was frozen.

Thinking only of that nameless figure, I couldn't take my eyes off that person.

That was how unusual that person's shadow, standing at the entrance of the alleyway, was.

In this cold weather, the person was not wearing socks, but a pair of round Japanese geta sandals. The varnished black bottom and the red strings made the white feet look even more beautiful, it was a sight to leave you speechless.

No, that wasn't the only special thing.

That person was wearing an orange kimono. It wasn't fancy holiday clothing, but rather the simple kind of kimono you'd see often in festivals. Covering that was a red leather jacket.

Clatter, the sound was made again.

And then there was the sound of feet hitting the ground. The person drew towards us step by step. The swaying hair, the sound of rustling clothing, I realized that my eyes wanted to take in every movement this person made to the very end. Without concern for my, Enjou Tomoe's, thoughts.

The shadow had approached in a natural manner, as if nothing had happened.

The black hair, black as if doused in ink, didn't even reach the shoulders. It had been cut carelessly, but somehow it fit this person. A narrow face and frame. White skin and eyes so black they seemed to look into your soul. A beauty that did not belong in a dirty back alley.

That person somehow looked like a woman... No, she looked about the same age as us, so maybe I should call her a girl.

The face was so neat that I couldn't tell the gender. Of course, no matter which it was, there was no doubt that this person was so beautiful that it would send a chill down your spine. But for some reason I thought that it was a female.

"Hey."

The girl spoke in a blunt manner that was a mix of Japanese and Western style.

After looking at this direction with an annoyed look, the girl came towards us for no reason.

The three guy surrounding me were puzzled and started surrounding the girl. Dulled by the violence, they were so frenzied they decided they wanted this girl. They showed their suppressed urges they normally wouldn't show anyone and converged on the girl.

"You got some business with us?" They said while walking.

Seeing them surround her as to not let her get away, it seemed that their three minds had become one now. Those dirty cowards, I swear, but I couldn't do anything. My incapable arms and legs were filled with bruises and didn't have any strength left.

Could I just stand by and let this kimono girl be defiled by these street punks? No, but could she really be taken by these guys?

"We asked you if you had some business with us. You have ears, right?" One of them came right up close to her and yelled.

Instead of replying, she raised one of her hands in whichever way.

... What had happened after that was truly like magic.

With her thin arm the girl grabbed his arm, she pulled with no effort. As if he were weightless, the boy spun around in a full circle and fell to the ground head first.

Maybe that was one of those judo throws. The movement was very quick, but it was so natural that it looked like it was in slow motion.

The other two leaped at the girl. She pushed one of their chests with her palm, and with just that her opponent was down. Even though it took me so much violence just to knock out just one guy, this girl made two people lose consciousness without a single wasted move. I'd say about five seconds had passed.

Just like how I had realized this fact, it seemed the one left over also realized that his opponent wasn't ordinary.

"Ooowah!" He screamed while beginning to flee. The girl kicked the head of the one who turned his back to flee. The clean roundhouse kick didn't even make noise and knocked out the last one.

"Tch, he was an idiot with a hard head."

Muttering, the girl fixed up her wrinkled kimono.

I was speechless as I just stared at her. In this trash-filled back alley where no streetlight or moonlight shined, just above her head it looked like a silver sparkle was pouring out.

"Hey, you."

The girl looked in my direction. I tried to say something, but with my mouth all cut up I decided to keep my mouth shut. The girl reached inside of a pocket in her leather jacket, pulled out a key, and threw it towards me. The worn key had fallen in front of me as I sat on the floor.

"I picked it up. It's yours, right?"

It sounded like it was coming from inside my brain.

... A key. Ah, maybe I had dropped it while getting hit a short bit ago. The home key for which I had absolutely no use anymore, did this girl come here just to give it to me?

Just then, the girl turned around as if she was all done here. There were no words of goodbye; no words of acknowledgment. Just like when she had found us, she walked out as if she was out taking a stroll... As if she had no interest in me.

"Wait." I said, and my hand moved.

To grab what? Why was I trying to catch her? I definitely – Enjou Tomoe definitely had no interest in a scary woman like her.

But-but, I couldn't stand her leaving me like this. I didn't care who it was, I didn't want to be thrown away. I couldn't stand the feeling of being told that I had no redeeming qualities, that I was really nothing more than a fake.

"Hey you, wait!"

Yelling, I got up... No, I tried to get up, but I couldn't stand up properly. Because my joints had no strength, all I could do was grab the wall and keep myself up in an unstable position.

The girl in the kimono stopped, and looked at me with a vision so cold that it would make anyone scream out.

"What is it? I didn't pick up anything else." She spoke calmly.

Even though five people were lay at her feet, it seemed that this person felt nothing.

"Hey, you weren't thinking of just leaving like this were you?"

After I spoke while gasping for breath, she finally looked around herself. Among the fallen ones, there were the two who I injured and they were now bleeding. They were the result of a very crude form of violence.

After saying "Hm," she looked up at me.

"Don't worry, that guy might not be able to use his eye, but that's not enough to kill him. The one who wakes up first will probably do something. But do you still think they need help right now?"

Even though the thin and high voice could only belong to a woman, the way of speaking was that of a man.

"Yes," I replied and nodded.

"Really? But in that case, which do we need to call? The police? Or the hospital?"

She asked sincerely, although something was a little strange. I was only thinking about the hospital, but if I wanted to claim self defense, calling the police might be faster. But–

"The police, are out of the question."

The girl asked, "Why?" with just her eyes.

Why was that? It was a secret that I definitely shouldn't tell anyone, but I considered it like using an emergency card and said it.

"I killed someone."

For a moment, it was as if time had stopped. After coming towards me, as if she had taken interest, the girl began to carefully inspect me, who was leaning against the wall, with her eyes.

"It doesn't look like it."

She said as if she didn't believe me. But, it seemed she wasn't quite sure by the way she put her finger to her mouth and thought to herself. I continued my masochistic confession.

"It's true. I just killed someone. I stabbed the stomach with a kitchen knife and I cut the throat. How can someone stay alive after that... Heh heh, right now the cops are probably at my house looking for me frantically. Yes, by dawn, I'll probably be famous!"

When I had realized what I was doing, I laughed at myself. "Ahah," I hear my laughter... For some reason, it sounded like crying.

"Alright. In that case I believe you. Then don't bother calling the hospital either. You'll be put into jail right there... Ah, is it that why you threw your shirt away because you got blood on it? I just thought it was a fad nowadays."

Cold hands rubbed against my chest.

"Look."

I swallowed my breath. As this girl had said the clothing I was wearing had been covered with blood. I had ran away after just putting on a pair of pants and pulling a blazer over my shoulders.

... I knew that this girl felt no surprise, even though she knew that I was a murderer. That made me feel even more uncomfortable.

"Aren't you scared? I killed someone. Killing one person, killing two people, they're the same. Do you think I'll let you go when you know the truth?"

"Killing one person and killing two people are different."

Squinting as if dissatisfied, the girl in the kimono had put her face up close.

... Even though I was taller by a head, I felt like I was looking up at her even though she was actually looking up at me.

Captivated by her black eyes, I swallowed my saliva. The reason I did so was not that our roles were reversed. It was just that, I was enraptured.

Until now I had never fallen for another human being. Having lived for seventeen years I had never been captivated like this. Not once had I forgotten myself and was this moved.

That was right, up to this point.

I had never felt that a human was beautiful.

"Really! I'm a murderer."

I wasn't able to say anything but that. The girl lowered her head and started laughing.

"I know. Because I'm one too."

The clothes had made noise as they rubbed against each other. As she had finally lost interest with this, she begun to leave. As she was leaving, she only made the noise *clatter clatter*.

... I didn't want to lose sight of her back.

"Wait, you said you were one too!"

I tried to run after her but I fell to the floor again. Even so, I barely managed to get up and looked at the girl who was looking back.

"Then help me. We're in the same circumstance, after all."

I was yelling with such audacity that I couldn't even think straight. Being desperate, I threw shame to the wind. While listening to my words that lacked logic and reason, the girl looked at me with her eyes open wide in surprise.

"Same circumstance... Hm, you're definitely completely empty. But, asking for help, what are you talking about? About the sin of killing a human? Or to fix the injuries on your body? I'm sorry, but neither are my specialties."

Ah, that's right. What kind of help did I want? I wanted help, but I was only thinking vaguely and I didn't know what kind of help I wanted... Even though it was something supremely important written in Enjou Tomoe's mind.

"People will see this soon. Hide me before that."

That was the very top priority. The girl looked troubled and thought deeply, her mannerisms now were the complete opposite of how she had acted.

"Hide you, are you asking me to offer a hiding place?"

"I just need you to lend me a hand until I get to a place where no one can see me."

“There’s no such place in this city. The only place where no one get to you is your own home.”

She spoke with an awkward expression. I knew that much at least. Maybe my mind had become impatient due to the pain of getting beat, but I wanted to yell.

“That’s why I’m asking for help! Are you going to let me stay at your house, you stupid bitch!?”

Dammit, I cursed at myself. With that, the girl nodded as if understanding.

“Alright. If where I’m staying is fine with you, use it as you please.”

“Huh?”

“What a simpleton, to ask for help with something like that.”

She had begun to walk without holding a hand out for me or offering a shoulder. Even so, her back told me to follow.

I followed behind her with a strength I found strange for me to possess. By doing so I could cleanly forget about the injuries on my beaten body, and the injuries in my mind from stabbing a person.

I just kept following this unconcerned person walking back. Did this girl live alone? I hadn’t even asked for her name. Even though there were many things I had to ask her, I couldn’t think.

... Yes, perhaps. I had never believed anything until now, but this might be what they called fate.

Already my eyes couldn’t see anything but her.

/2 (Paradox Spiral, 2)

Click, there was a noise. It was from the room beside mine.

Was it getting around ten o'clock? Only a few minutes had passed since I entrusted my body to my bed sheets, and I was tired from work. Having been woken up from my shallow sleep, I was suddenly beginning to doze off again.

The noise from the other side of the door had only come once.

The door had opened. It was connected to the room next door. A square light had entered my dark room that had its lights switched off. Was it mother? I sneaked a peek in that direction with half closed eyes.

At this point I always had a thought.

That, this kind of scene, it would have been better had I not seen it.

The one who had opened the door was my mother. Because of the light coming from behind her I couldn't tell anything about her except that she was standing there. That image wasn't important as my eyes only saw the dreadful image visible though the open door.

The image of my father laying slumped over the dinner table.

The cheap table, which should be brown, was dyed red and my fallen father kept dripping red blood onto the floor... It just seemed like a broken tap.

"Tomoe, please die," said the standing shadow.

I only knew that the shadow was my mother after I had been stabbed in the chest. My mother stabbed me over and over with the kitchen knife, lastly she slit her own throat with it.

It was a nightmare to end all nightmares.

My nights, always finished in this manner.

...

Click, click, click.

... When I woke up to the sound in my ears, Ryougi had already gone out. Lifting up my body, which was bruised all over from the beating I got, I looked around the room.

Stuck in the corner of the second floor of a four story apartment, this was the house of the kimono girl. Or, would it be more appropriate to call it a room than a house? The hallway stretched one meter from the front door to the living room, and on the way was a door leading to the bathroom.

As if the living room doubled as a bedroom, the bed upon which the woman was sleeping until a moment ago was there. There was another room next to the living room but it seemed that it wasn't being used.

Last night.

After following her for an hour, the place I arrived at was this room. Seeing as the mailbox at the apartment entrance bore the name Ryougi, it seemed that the woman's last name was Ryougi.

Even after that woman, Ryougi, brought me into the room she didn't say anything but instead stripped off her leather jacket and crawled into bed.

Even indifference should have a limit. I started to get angry and honestly thought about assaulting her. But, if I did so and caused a commotion a crowd would gather, and I would be in trouble. After pondering what to do for a long time I used a cushion that was rolling around on the floor as a pillow and just decided to sleep.

And, this morning, when I opened my eyes, that woman was nowhere to be seen.

"What the hell is she thinking?" I mumbled absentmindedly.

I started thinking back after I had regained my cool, Ryougi appeared to be the same age as me. It seemed more suitable to call her a girl than a woman.

If she were seventeen, she would be a student. In that case had she gone to school? I didn't really think that was correct, this room was too bleak to accept that. The only things in this room were a bed, fridge, phone, four leather jackets hanging on the coat rack, and a wardrobe which felt like it would contain clothing. There was no TV or even a radio. There were no magazines that were carelessly dropped after being read, and there wasn't even a table.

All of the sudden, I remembered her words from last night.

When I said that I had killed someone Ryougi replied that she had done the same... Ryougi's words didn't seem real back then, but they might have been true after all. Because this room was a fugitive's room. The sense that someone lived here was lacking to the point of morbidity. At that moment I got a chilling sensation. I thought I had picked up the ace of spades but had I picked up a joker instead?

... Whatever the case I didn't intend to stay long. I wanted to at least say goodbye but since the person in question wasn't here there was no helping it. Walking carefully like a thief who had broken in, I decided to leave the unfamiliar girl's room.

Coming outside, I wandered aimlessly.

At first I hesitantly went around the road beside the apartments, but regardless of my situation the world was no different from usual. Like a hand on a clock, going round and round, everything was just repeating its daily routine with no change at all.

So it was like this in the end. Depressed, I came out to the main road. The road was the same as always. There were no police looking for Enjou Tomoe, and there were no looks holding me in contempt for being a murderer.

For some reason it seemed the bodies hadn't been found yet. Yes, there was no way the world could change so much due to something a halfwit like me did. I didn't seem to be a fugitive yet. Even so I didn't feel like going back home.

It was past noon and I had come to the plaza with the bronze statue of a dog. Draping myself onto a suitable bench, I looked up at the big neon sign set up on a nearby building.

I spent a few blank hours in that state.

Even though it was a weekday this place was booming with people. The sidewalks were overflowing with people and when the pedestrian lights turned green, a tide of humanity flowed out with a force that seemed set to knock the cars out of the way.

The majority of the crowd were humans that weren't so different in age from me. On the whole, they walked forward with smiling faces or iron visages. There was no hesitation there. No, they probably had never even thought of hesitating. On their faces there wasn't even the word "life." I couldn't see these faces as living for a hope-filled future or a dream they wished to fulfill. Everyone walked on with faces that said they knew everything about the world. But among all that, how much truth was there?

Was it everyone, or was it just a portion?

Real and fake. I kept looking from within the crowds, unable to be reconciled, and tried to find a real one, but couldn't distinguish them at all.

Wouldn't that be expected? As originally the only one who would know such a thing was oneself.

I turned my eyes from the crowds of humanity up towards the sky.

Yes, up to that point I wasn't real. I may have thought I was real but then I hopelessly revealed my true nature.

... Until I had entered high school Enjou Tomoe had been a well known name in the track and field world. Hating to lose, I didn't once see the backs of other athletes during junior high. I was confident of shortening my record further still, and there was no reason to suspect my intelligence either.

Besides, I liked to run more than anything else. In that, I at least was genuine. I even had a conviction that I wouldn't let any obstacle get in my way.

But I stopped running.

Our family was never rich. My father had lost his job when I was in elementary school so our household was always barren. My mother had been born in a distinguished family and it was said that she had broken off all ties with them to marry my father. My father lost his

job and didn't work, and my mother grew up ignorant of the world and didn't know how to do anything.

In that crumbling family I think I grew up faster than other children. I lied about my age to do part-time work and I was at least earning my school fees in any way I could. I didn't know anything of what was going on with our family. I was too busy just living my life.

I went to school with the money I earned, and entered high school through my efforts alone. There was my parents, whom I already could not think of as parents, and the problem of money with which to live on. To me who bore those two burdens, running was my unique salvation.

So no matter how tired I was I continued club activities and was able to enter high school as well.

But then my father caused an accident. He hit a person with a car. That wasn't the only problem. My father didn't even have a driver's license...

I think my mother obtained the indemnity for the victim's family by borrowing money from her family with her head bowed. At that time I was depressed and didn't want to think about anything so I couldn't be sure.

Waiting for me, after all the strife was over, was the change in my surroundings. There was no longer any connection between me and my parents, but simply for the reason that I was their child there was a sudden change in the school community's attitude towards me.

The track team coaches, who had always been helpful, then began to openly ignore me. The seniors, who had supported me saying that a prodigy had joined the club, pressured me to quit the track team.

But I was already used to that sort of thing, so it wasn't really a problem.

My problem was my family. Because of the accident, my dad lost the little income he had and no longer had the strength to support a family. My mother started doing unfamiliar part-time work, but that kind of thing could only cover the heating and lighting bills.

Already unable to obtain a proper job from a few years back, to make us more miserable, my dad killed a person while driving without a license. That rumor spread and spread until my dad could no longer go outside. My mother braved the insults to go and find work but she could never stay in one place for long. It got so bad that if I just took a walk somebody would throw a rock at me.

... The criticism from those around us got worse daily, but I didn't feel any anger about it. What my father did was real. I thought of the persecution and contempt as a natural reaction. After all the one at fault wasn't the world, but my dad.

And yet, it wasn't as if the object of my anger was my parents either.

At that time I hated everything. Everything that surrounded me became annoying.

No matter what you did or how hard you tried, the result would be the same. No matter how fast you ran, if that annoying thing called family followed along, the future was as clear as a flame at night.

It was definitely then that I had stopped fighting.

We chased after the so-called natural life and underwent painful experiences as a result. If I accept that my life was like this anyway, then there was no reason to think myself unfortunate. It was just like when we're young. Exchanging reality for a fantasy, I decided to live on by myself. Everything seemed unimportant after I made that choice, and school was the first thing I quit.

No, if I didn't work all day then I couldn't support my family. If you are young there are plenty of jobs available regardless of experience. Awkwardly for me, I possessed that useless thing called a conscience and I couldn't throw away my family. Yet I didn't talk to them at all after I had quit school.

I continued on like this, and I woke up one day to find that I had clean forgotten about the running I had liked so much.It was something that I had enjoyed so much, something that had been such a source of relief. It became something I gave up because a small misfortune occurred, that realization shocked even me.

The people who had praised me disappeared, and I didn't have time to run anymore. How could such excuse-like things break me of my enjoyment?

If I was real, if running was something that I could never have exchanged for anything else, if running was the "Origin" of the human called Enjou Tomoe, things wouldn't have turned out like that.

... When I was young, I followed my parents to a ranch and saw a horse. Seeing that horse that I didn't even know the name of, I broke down and cried. Seeing that being whose only act in life was to run, I couldn't stop my tears from pouring out. If there were such things as past lives, I would have been one of them. That was how strong my belief was, that was how much I admired the very act of running itself.

But I was a fake.

Yes. It was just that I had a firm belief of my reality, I was actually nothing more than a fake–

"You even killed a person in the end."

"Heh heh," I laughed. To be laughing when I wasn't happy at all, humans are so flawed.

Even looking at the sky had gotten tedious, so I looked around the street.

... The flood of humanity hadn't ceased at all.

Those people going on by, with smiling or cold faces, couldn't be real. If they were living with some goal in mind there was no way they would be in a pleasure area like this. Or rather, if you were to say that their objective in life was to play – that kind of "real" I couldn't accept.

... Click, click, click.

Suddenly, I had come back to my senses from there onward. For me, as self-righteous as my thoughts were, there was nothing like a meaning in my position.

Looking at the clock, it was becoming night time without me having noticed. I couldn't stay here for hours on end. I left the overflowing tide of humanity behind and left that place.

◇

The light from a weak streetlight was illuminating the street by an unfamiliar residence.

After the autumn sun fell I walked for three hours.

While pondering where to spend the night, I recollected my wits and found that I was close to Ryougi's apartment. Humans, it's amazing how they become so effeminate when they fall so low.

I was always prideful of the fact that the merit of the guy called Enjou Tomoe was the rapidity with which my feelings changed. But when I was like this it wasn't fast or slow. Was I still unable to cut those lingering attachments after all?

When I looked up I didn't see a light on in Ryougi's room. It seemed that she was absent.

"Fine. Since I've come here I may as well look."

I went up the stairs. To confront the harsh reality, the reason for my actions was that I wanted to guide that part of me that still clung to a unique salvation. Going up the iron stairway that clanged with every step, I arrived at the room on the end of the second floor.

The paper that was here when I had come out this morning wasn't there now. It looked like Ryougi had come back once. There was no response even when I knocked on the door.

"See, she's not there."

After I just waited for a bit I tried turning the handle.

It moved.

The door had opened easily.

The inside was dark. With my grip on the handle, I froze. My mind was blank. How long was I going to stand here like this? The moment I thought that, I shoved my body through the opening and went inside.

"___"

Gulp, I swallowed my saliva.

I couldn't believe this, I couldn't believe this, I couldn't believe I would do something like this.

Of course I was playing the part of the criminal now, but I had always hated anything resembling crime. Since I was young I had disliked cowardly acts. Yet, after committing murder I was now trespassing. No, this was force majeure. Anyway, that girl said so as well; that I could use this place as I liked.

Click, click, click.

Repeating incoherent excuses from the bottom of my heart, I walked in. From the front door to the corridor; from the corridor to the lounge. The lights weren't on so the room was dark. Within the darkness, I gasped for breath and killed the noise of my footsteps.

Dammit, under these circumstance I may as well be a thief. Lights; I had to turn on the lights. You'd get suspicious if it was dark. Ah, but where was the switch?

I patted the wall looking for the light switch that would turn on the fluorescent lights.

At that moment I heard the door open.

Ryougi had come back, before I could think to explain myself, the owner of the house turned on the light and opened the door. She opened it, and stared at my trespassing self with blank eyes.

"What, you came today as well? What are you doing, not even turning the lights on?"

Speaking coldly, as if berating a classmate, Ryougi closed the door to the room and shed her leather jacket. Standing next to the edge of the bed in that state, she had put her free hand into the convenience store's plastic bag she was holding with her other hand and rustled around.

"Do you want it? I hate cold things."

Hwik, she threw me a cup of ice-cream. The label said Häagen-Dazs strawberry. The fact that she didn't care about an invader like me wasn't the only puzzling thing about her, buying something she didn't like was a riddle as well.

Holding the cold cup in both hands, I fully mobilized my reasoning power.

This girl didn't care about me at all. Even though she knew... well I couldn't be sure how sincerely she took it... that I was a murderer. Does the fact that she still offered her room as a refuge mean that this girl was someone the police were after too..?

"... Hey. You. You're a suspicious person aren't you?"

When I asked such a thing, ignoring all the things I had done, the kimono girl started laughing, "Ahahaha!" loudly.

"You are a weird one, you are! Aha, suspicious, you say I'm suspicious! That's a really good expression, it really captures the feeling, really!"

Ryougi was earnestly laughing. As the black hair, that she had cut as she liked, became scattered, I couldn't see her as anything but a suspicious person.

"Haha, ahahahaha, ha, Mmm, yeah. There's no one in this area who kicks up a fuss like me. But didn't you kick up quite a fuss yourself? In that case it shouldn't matter what's happened, should it? For that sort of thing? Is that all you have to say?"

Wearing a meaningful smile, the kimono girl looked up at me... That pose with its air of somewhat fragile tranquility, it was similar to a child holding a new toy.

"No.... Just one more question. Why, are you helping me?"

"You asked me to help you. I helped you since I didn't have anything else to do. You don't have a place to sleep do you? You can use this place for a while. It's not as if Mikiya's coming anytime soon anyway."

... You helped because you had nothing better to do? What the hell was that? However relaxed you may be, what kind of stupid reason was that? My mind may be upside down,

but it was not mangled so badly as to blindly accept that. With this as evidence I could at least figure out if this girl was lying or not.

I glared at the girl in the kimono. She didn't pay any attention at all. It was different from disregard, but it wasn't imposing indifference either... What was this paradox? Distressingly, there was no reason to suspect that Ryougi wasn't speaking sincerely.

If it wasn't that... Could it be that this person didn't need a beneficial reason? She probably wasn't thinking of a typical reason like; because you are a friend or because it would make me money.

But, even then–

"Are you for real? You are going to hide a suspicious guy like me without wanting anything in return? You haven't taken any drugs have you?"

"What a rude thing to say. I hate drugs, and I'm extremely normal. I didn't even report anything to the police. Although I will if you tell me to."

Ah, I also wasn't worried about such a thing. Who could picture this girl contacting the police? What I was worried about was something more basic than that.

"Look. I'm a guy and you are a girl. Letting someone you don't even know sleep over is a bit... I'm asking if it's still okay, that's what I'm saying!"

"What? Don't guys go somewhere different if they want to sleep with a girl?"

At this reply spoken with a preposterous face, I didn't know what to say.

"No, I'm saying since–"

"Ah, just shut up. If this place isn't to your liking you can just find another place to stay. Why are you stubbornly sounding out what I think?"

Harshly cutting off my words the girl put her hand back into the plastic bag. What she took out was a triangular tomato sandwich... It really seemed like she didn't care if someone like me was in her vicinity.

"In that case I will use this place for sleeping. Is that okay?"

Although I shouted because of my frustration, the other party didn't bat an eyelid and nodded assent.

"Fine. I'll tell you it's annoying, if it gets annoying," Ryougi said while chewing the sandwich.

With that my strength had left me and I sat myself down plumply onto the floor.

And time flowed by.

However it was, I decided to go along boldly. As if to try and regain the conceit that the merit of Enjou Tomoe was his quick change in feelings, I thought about my days to come. I had obtained a place to sleep for now. As for meals, the thirty-thousand yen I had on me should last me for a month. In that time I'll have to find a way to live without being caught by the police.

"Eh?"

All of the sudden, a question formed. Why was it that tonight the front door hadn't been locked?

"Hey, why didn't you lock the door?"

"Isn't it obvious, I don't have a key so I don't lock it."

"What?"

Hearing that I almost fainted.

This girl, Ryougi, apparently she didn't have a key to the apartment. The only time she locked the door was when she slept, when she went out she just closed the door. The perspective of the person in question was that even if a thief was to come in while she was away, there would be no harm done to her.

So the reason I was able to trespass wasn't a coincidence or anything. It could be that the reason for the absence of any household items in this room was because a burglar broke in.

"You idiot, at least take a key around! Normally, you go and borrow a spare key from the owner if you don't have one."

"I lost the spare too. So what? It's nothing that would trouble you, and if you stole these kind of things it would just weigh you down."

... Damn it, if I talk one way she's the type to rebut my words in that manner. Even so I can't relax if she didn't have a key. There was supposed to be a sense of self-preservation that's always on one's mind, but was that instinct missing in the Ryougi lived?

I put aside the indescribable repulsion I had been holding towards Ryougi until a moment ago, and truly worried about this immature kid.

"Don't say something so stupid. What kind of house doesn't have a key? Wait... Since it's become like this, I'll replace the whole thing with a new one for you."

"... That's fine but, do you have the money?"

"Don't think so lowly of me. I can do this much at least. I'll do it all tonight, so from tomorrow on carry a key with you properly!"

And, I stood up.

I worked at a moving company. I learned enough about repairing things around a house that I could easily repair something like an apartment door. At the storage facility of the company I had worked at, until two days ago, there should at least be something like a stock door handle.

With a vigor I could scarcely credit, I was running out into the nighttime streets. How would I secretly enter the building when the police could catch me at any moment? I was earnestly wondering that, when I realized that I was on an extremely dangerous adventure.

Really, I couldn't say anything about Ryougi. To be breaking into the company I had worked at for a girl I didn't even properly know the name of, I was a pretty crazy person too.

/3 (Paradox Spiral, 3)

Close to a week had passed since I started staying in Ryougi's room.

With both Ryougi and I going out during the day, a strange state of affairs continued where we only saw each other when we went to sleep at night. Even so it was inconvenient not knowing each other's names after a week or so had passed, so we told each other our names.

Her name was Ryougi Shiki. Surprisingly enough, she really was a high school student. I didn't know anything more than that.

Ryougi called me Enjou. Maybe because of that, I called Ryougi Shiki just the name Ryougi. Ryougi herself disliked being called by her family name, but I couldn't bring myself to call her Shiki.

The reason was simple. To be frank, I didn't have that strong of a resolve. I didn't want to become friendlier than was necessary with someone that I would one day part from forever. If I had come to call her Shiki, it would definitely become more difficult to leave this girl. I thought that such a relationship would only be a hindrance to someone like me, who might've been caught by the police at any time.

◇

"Enjou, don't you have a girlfriend?"

On a night no different from any other, sitting cross-legged on the bed, Ryougi threw an unexpected question at me without any warning. Ryougi's questions, they always began abruptly like this.

"A girlfriend... Well, if I had one I wouldn't come rolling into a place like this."

"Oh. You look like you would be popular."

"Hearing such an empty compliment doesn't make me happy at all. I'm sick of girls anyway."

"Oho, how come?"

Ryougi must have felt some interest in the story as she pushed her head out towards me as I lay on the floor. From my position, laying right beside the bed, it looked like only her head was popping out and it was somehow cute.

“Are you gay?”

... I take that back. Thinking that this brat could be cute was just delusional.

“There’s no particular reason. To put it simply, it was just annoying. I tried dating for real, and it wasn’t very fun.”

I had never really liked those of the opposite sex. There was a time in high school when I went out with a girl for three months, but that wasn’t a sweet memory and I think all we did was fight a lot.

Before I knew it I was haltingly telling her about my recollections.

“It wasn’t that I wanted very much. But she wanted too much from me. At first I thought ‘well I guess that’s how it goes’ and I put up with it.”

Yeah. I bought her anything she wanted, and if she wanted to be fancy I paid for it. There probably wasn’t an instance when I didn’t meet her high expectations. She was happy every time, but on the other hand I was cooling off towards her. Sex wasn’t as great as everyone thought either.

... It felt like Ryougi was listening properly to my soliloquy.

“After a while I started getting sick of her. It’s not just the surrounding environment. Time, money, even emotions, it felt like a waste to give them to her. I did kind of like her, but satisfying your sexual appetite is something you can do alone. If I was a normal student, I would have had too much time on my hands. But I didn’t have any free time. The more time I spent with her the less sleep I got. For someone like me, without even a minute to spare, something like a girlfriend was an impossibility from the start.”

However I hadn’t tried to break up.

She looked happy, and I didn’t want to put her in tears by issuing an absolute statement like “let’s break up”... I didn’t want to inflict any wounds, and I didn’t like receiving wounds either.

“But you still broke up. How did you dump her?”

“You know, you should stop treating me like the bad guy. I was the one that got dumped. She told me suddenly after we did everything to do at a hotel. That ‘you never looked at me. You just looked at my body and never saw my mind’. Honestly, saying it was a bit of a shock.”

As I had told the story’s conclusion with a shrug, Ryougi rudely bursted into laughter.

“Amazing, ‘you don’t look at my mind!’ Haha, you got caught by some fussy woman, didn’t ya Enjou!”

The springs in the bed creaked in protest. This brat, she was rolling around on top of the bed laughing.

"What, was there something strange about my story? It's my bitter memories of youth you know."

I got angry and bolted upright. Ryougi then stopped laughing and stared at me.

"It's weird. The only thing humans can see is the outward appearance. But that girl said that you only looked at the body that she thought was insignificant, to say that you don't like someone because they can't see something invisible like the mind, that kind of girl isn't normal. Not being normal means you are abnormal. See, it's funny. That girl, if she wanted you to see her mind she could have written a letter. Enjou, you did well to break up with that girl."

Coldly making fun of me, Ryougi laid back on the bed. Like a cat she stared at me blankly from that position, then Ryougi opened her mouth as if it was difficult for her to say what followed.

"... Well, it's not something for me to say, but, if you speak out loud about an uneasiness that 'cannot be seen' it becomes a lie. I can't know myself but love is believing in something. The blindness of love, isn't that its meaning?"

"It's something I heard from someone else though," Ryougi added and then she fell asleep.

She ended the conversation like usual, in an abrupt manner, like splitting bamboo. I also went to bed with a troubled mind.

Turning off the lights, I was thinking as I fell asleep. I was a complete dunderhead when it came to those people, those women, that I had feelings for. But I think that if it had been this girl, there wouldn't have been such unilateral demands. No, if it was Ryougi, wouldn't even I be able to take such annoying things with a smile on my face?

◇

It was a night of the second week.

When I opened the door with my key and went inside Ryougi was already asleep... As if she thought of me as some sort of cat, she didn't show any signs of waking up even when she heard me rambling around.

But that was a good thing today.

Hiding my pummeled cheek, I plopped myself down on the floor.

Click, click, Tick, click.

The bedside clock went around. Both the hands were pointing to the twelve... For some reason, I hated clock faces. Digital displays were my preference. A feeling came to me, it felt that there was no place for me inside the spinning clock, and I had gotten afraid.

"Ow."

My bruised leg suddenly throbbed with pain and I screamed before I could stop myself.

Ryougi was sleeping like the dead. There was no sign that she would wake up. That profile of her face, I unthinkingly stared at it. In the two weeks that we had lived together, I had come to know only one thing.

This girl, really was a doll.

She was always asleep on the bed like a corpse. This girl didn't wake up in the morning; instead she resurrected from death when she had something to do. At first I thought it was to go to school, but I didn't think that was the reason anymore. Because whenever she received a phone call from somewhere, Ryougi regained her vitality.

It goes without saying, that I sensed that the subject matter of those calls were suspicious.

However, Ryougi was waiting for that. In its absence, this girl remained here like some doll.

Click, click, Tick, click.

That image was too beautiful. There was nothing as inconsequential as sadness. Ryougi delighted only in the things she had to do and came back to life.

This was perfection without fault. For the first time, I met the "real thing" that I had concluded I would never see. That which I had believed was like that. That which I wanted to be. That pure strength, which took no notice of what others did as long as you had yourself.

"Shiki."

From my mouth, Ryougi's name had leaked out. More quiet than a whisper, an utterance that was like an expelled breath.

But Ryougi's eyes snapped wide open.

"What the, you're bruised all over again?"

As soon as she had opened her eyes, Ryougi wrinkled her brow.

"I couldn't help it. The other side kept provoking me for no reason."

I told her how it happened. While coming back today, I got tangled up with two people I didn't know and we had beaten each other up. Of course I laid them out, but I'm also unskilled at fighting and had gotten a lot of wounds.

"You did something, didn't you? To be so weak even with just two people. Do you like being hit?" Ryougi said as she sat up on the bed, "You did something, does that mean something like martial arts or judo?"

"Don't draw any unquantified conclusions. I don't know anything about martial arts. Although if it's just fighting, I can do it as well as the next guy."

"Oh? I definitely thought you would, since you used your palm when fighting. Then how did you know to use the palm of your hand?"

Ah, I should have guessed. Now that I thought about it, I was once congratulated about that. When hitting someone, a person who hadn't trained his fist would just hurt his hand. After a few hits their own bones could get damaged. So it was better for half-baked amateurs like me to use our palms to hit with.

No, there were martial arts where the palm was more effective and was used instead. Of course, I didn't know anything like that.

"Your palm is harder. Doesn't everyone use their palms to crush cans? There probably aren't many who would do it with their fists."

"That's because it's easier with the palm of your hand."

Although Ryougi replied coldly, it seemed like she was admiring me in truth. She cautiously looked at my face. Getting embarrassed by her scrutiny, I struggled and kept talking.

"So what did you do, Ryougi? Some Aikido?"

"Aikido is just for fun. There's only one thing I've done since I was young."

"Since you were young, eh? I thought you were strong. It was you who let loose a high kick at the back of a fleeing opponent's head. I thought how you acted was different. It was because of that. So do you have anything like a finishing move?"

I asked the lamest questions. But Ryougi went "Mmm", and fell into serious thought.

"There are fighting forms with finishing moves. Everyone trains with the assumption that they'll defeat their opponent. So if you want to call it a finishing move, I have one. But I don't have a proper form, I've always been self-taught."

"The thing you train is your mindset," Ryougi added.

"You remake your body. From your breathing to the placement of your feet, awareness, thoughts, to be able to remake all of them for combat. Even the way of using your muscles changes, so it might feel like you become a different person. I suppose tensing your body and mind as a fight starts, and while you are fighting, is the foundation of all martial arts. However, it even changes the way you use your muscles, so it might feel like you're becoming a different person."

In response to this dialogue that seemed to scorn oneself, I couldn't do anything but cock my head.

"What, if you're strong then that's that. There wont be any instances where you go around getting bashed up like me. And you finished off those three guys in an instant. That's an incredible self-created style right there."

When I spoke, I remembered that refreshing instant of when I met this girl, Ryougi seemed a bit surprised.

"That's different. I only copied what I had seen. More than that, there's never been an instance where I've used our house's school of fighting."

She nonchalantly spat out that frightening statement, then Ryougi collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep.

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... Steam was rising from somewhere.

Sheek, sheek, and a noise that seemed like something from a picture book could be heard.

There was no light, and the room was dark.

This place... was hot.

Only the sound of the burning metal plate and that magma-like light were my unique supports.

On the walls around me, huge jars were lined up neatly.

There were long, thin pipes scattered all over the floor.

There was no one.

Only the sound of steam, and the noise of the water being boiled.....

.....

..... It was night, and I suddenly opened my eyes.

Because, I had a bad dream.

Click, click, Tick, click.

The clock said it was still three in the morning, dawn; there was still a while to go before it was time to wake up. When I turned to look at the bed, Ryougi wasn't there... As it so happened, that girl occasionally took walks at night. Even so, to go and wander about at dawn when even the vegetation was asleep...

Should I go out and greet her? Although I knew that not getting involved in each other's private lives under any circumstances was an unspoken condition for using this place as an abode, I had that thought.

I had hesitated for a while then thought, fine, and got straight up.

No matter how strong she was, it didn't change the fact that Ryougi was a girl of the same age as me. On top of that, her appearance was more than enough for those idiots who go around in packs at night to fall for her.

Just when I made up my mind and went out into the corridor, the front door opened noiselessly to admit the girl in her normal attire of a red jacket over a kimono. As expected, Ryougi closed the door without making a sound.

"What, you've come back?"

I felt like I had taken a blow for some reason, and that remark popped out of my mouth.

A glance, and Ryougi turned to look at me.

At that instant, I thought that I was going to be killed.

The lights were off and the corridor was dark. In that darkness, only Ryougi's eyes were shining with a blue hue. I couldn't do anything. Couldn't breath, couldn't think properly, I could only stand there like a post.

"You too, won't do."

I heard a noise. When I regained my wits, Ryougi had breezed past me and angrily thrown her leather jacket on the bed as if she was in a temper tantrum. Ryougi sat down on the bed, then leaned back on the wall to stare at the ceiling.

Withstanding the chill that still ran down my spine, I came back into the room, and sat down on the floor. A period of silence passed that made me wonder if we wouldn't drift off to sleep.

Suddenly, the girl started talking.

"I... went out to kill a person."

Those words, how was I supposed to respond to them? All I could do was go "Oh is that so?" and nodded.

"But it was all for nothing. Since I couldn't find anyone I wanted to kill today either. A moment ago, when you were in the corridor, I thought I might be satisfied if it was you, but as expected it wasn't to be. Even if I did it, there's no meaning to it."

"... I thought I was totally dead."

I spoke honestly, and Ryougi replied "That's why it wouldn't work."

"I want to feel that I'm alive. But there's no meaning to just killing people. I am wandering around at night without even an objective. That's no different from being a ghost. Someday, I will meaninglessly kill someone."

It may have seemed like Ryougi was speaking to Enjou Tomoe, but in fact she wasn't talking to anyone... She was as blank as a drug addict suffering from withdrawal symptoms.

This sort of thing had never happened until now. The Ryougi from around that time when I first met her might have wandered about at night, but there had never been an instance when she had returned with such a murderous intent.

"Hey, what's wrong with you, Ryougi? It's unlike you. Wake up!"

Funnily enough, I was grabbing onto her shoulder, which I hadn't even brushed against before. I couldn't believe it. That the shoulder of the girl, who seemed so detached... was so, slender.

"... My mind's fine. I had this kind of feeling during summer too. At that time as well."

As if she remembered something unpleasant, Ryougi stopped talking. I took my hand off Ryougi and got off the bed. Ryougi gave up leaning on the wall and lay back on the bed.

"Hey, Ryougi."

I tried calling her name, but there was no response. That brat said it before. That the mind is something that cannot be seen. Therefore, a problem that was invisible was something that must never be confessed to another person.

That's right, Ryougi was a loner. I am also like that, but I at least have a few friends that I meet casually for a change of mood. That was me, but this girl probably didn't have any such person. Since this girl, who was perfect even in the smallest details unlike me, didn't have the need for something like that.

"Hey, Ryougi. Do you have any friends?"

I tried not to look at the girl's face and asked the question with my back facing the bed. Ryougi thought briefly, and then replied, "I have one."

"What? You have one? You? A friend?"

In complete opposition to the surprised me, Ryougi calmly said "Yes," and nodded.

"In that case, the story's simple. When you feel down, it doesn't matter if it's pointless, just try hanging out with them. Just changing the scenery will ease your mind. Forgetting things like your problems and talking about insignificant things will make you feel better."

"I don't have one right now. That guy's gone far away."

I had become unable to say anything at her words because Ryougi's voice sounded so lonely, maybe that was just my opinion. As Ryougi worked herself up into a rage as she started to slam the bed with her fists.

"That guy just freely does whatever on a whim! Coming over to my house whenever the fancy strikes and gives me nothing but a phone number. Getting sick for a month in summer, too. Why do I have to be anxious about a guy like that!?"

Phwock, phwock, there were some violent sounds.

This time I really couldn't trust my eyes. The indomitable Ryougi was waving her arms and legs around on the bed and throwing a tantrum.

No, the reality might not have been something so simple. She could have been stabbing the pillow with her knife. Whatever it was, the sound was changing from a whacking noise to a ripping noise.

I was afraid to check out the situation, so I didn't turn around to look at Ryougi.

She continued to cause a commotion for a time, then Ryougi went quiet.

In any case, I envy that friend or whatever who could drive Ryougi so crazy. I found that I wanted to know more about that person.

"Hey, Ryougi."

"..."

As if she was still upset, Ryougi didn't answer. I ignored the silence and continued.

"That person you said is a friend. What's your relationship with them? A friend from high school?"

"Yeah, he's a high school friend, but he's like a poet."

What did "like a poet" mean? Was their age similar? Was it a guy or a girl? I decided to leave such questions for another day. There wasn't much point to me knowing anyhow.

"Okay, so your wandering around at night, is that person the cause?"

Ryougi thought briefly.

"Nah. Walking at night is my hobby, and my murderous impulse is mine alone. No one else is involved. The problem is mine, so I know what kind of state I'm in right now... Hmm, in short, I'm so unbalanced right now, that I make even you feel uneasy around me."

Ryougi spoke serenely, as if describing someone else's affairs.

"Uneasy, I'm not particularly uneasy."

"When you told me that you felt like you were going to be murdered by me?"

A pretty voice had come flying at my throat.

... A feeling like a cold snake coiling itself around my neck had come to me. Very briefly, I questioned if the thing rolling around behind me was really human.

"See, you thought that again now as well. But that's a misplaced uneasiness. The reason I kill is because I can't feel that I'm alive. You can't be a target."

... What did that mean? Was Ryougi saying that even if she killed me, Enjou Tomoe, she wouldn't enjoy it?

"But, okay. You still need to find another place to stay, Enjou. I only can't feel that I'm alive, but Ryougi Shiki definitely likes to kill."

Abruptly, Ryougi murmured that, as if confessing something. The subdued tone of her voice. That voice seemed about to break, as if she was laying bare the troubles of her heart... Dammit, the woman who was already far away seemed even further off.

With that, I realized. I feared this girl, no, I was strongly attracted to her more than I feared her.

"Idiot, how in the world can that be?"

At any rate, I continued the conversation because I wanted to refute Ryougi's words.

"All it is, is that your heart's uneasy. Quickly call in that friend or whatever of yours and let out everything, even if you don't feel like it. Friends are there for that reason; if you don't you'll drift far off from each other."

Pouring out everything in my heart up to that point I then cut off my words. In the same way as Ryougi had before, I talked as I liked, swept up by my emotions, and only realized after the fact that I did something wrong.

"That's all I'm trying to say. Good night."

I spat out those words as if I was chewing bugs, and laid down to sleep.

Ryougi said something, but I ignored it and decided to sleep. I'm not confident of being able to speak in a normal way any further with Ryougi tonight.

The reason was simple. I had pricked my heart with the words I had poured out.

Yeah, no matter what I did.

That friend's role will never come around to me.

/4 (Paradox Spiral, 4)

That day, I was at the back alley where I first met Ryougi.

Even in these daylight hours there was no one about, and not even the myriad noises of the streets could be heard. I was standing in the place where the bloodstains of that time had neatly disappeared, exhaling white clouds of vapor into the cold air.

Click, click, click, tick.

October was drawing to an end too. It was approaching one month since I ran away casting aside home, work, and everything else in my life.

However there was no sign that the police were looking for me. Not only that but on the TV news that I diligently went to check everyday at the mall, nothing about the murder I had committed was being said. I had been reading the newspapers too whenever I felt like it, but as expected no such story had appeared.

That affair, it was in a whole different dimension from the street homicides going on right now. There was no doubt that it was the sort of thing that the TV audiences would lap up. So there was no way it would have been handled as a simple accident.

“Impossible. Could it be that they haven’t discovered it yet?”

Hearing my mumbling voice, I wanted to throw up the contents of my stomach.

It was not as if what happened to people like that mattered but, just thinking about what those bodies would look like after they had been left there for a month wrapped me up in gloom.

Should I go take a look? No, that wasn’t possible. I didn’t have the courage to do so, and there could have been police watching the scene. In any case all I could do was keep a watch on the situation from outside like this.

If it were just once.

If it were just once for it to be reported on TV as a crime, I could harden my mind and disappear from Ryougi’s life. If Enjou Tomoe became known to the world as a murderer, it would be an inconvenience to Ryougi, and I could leave this street with no regrets.

“Dammit, what did I do?”

Did that mean I couldn't leave Ryougi?

Click, click, click, tick.

The wind had picked up. I came walking out of the back alley as if I was being chased by the cold north wind. I was walking through the downtown area when I saw Ryougi at a far-off pedestrian crossing. A red jacket over a kimono – it couldn't be anyone but her.

Looking at that figure from far away, I spotted a familiar face. It was a guy from that night Ryougi and I first met, one of the ones who were the cause of that meeting. With practiced footsteps he was acting natural while he followed Ryougi.

Click, click-click, tick.

Hey, that's dangerous. Mixing into the crowd I followed the guy stalking Ryougi. After following Ryougi for a long time the guy went off somewhere. Shortly afterward, another guy from that time replaced him and continued to stalk Ryougi.

It seemed that they didn't actually plan to do anything to Ryougi but simply stalk her. Even so, for them, their movements were too faultless and well-organized to be not suspicious.

I kept watching them for an hour, and then decided that I needed to know where the one that had trailed off went. Fortunately the one that fainted after eating Ryougi's high kick had finished his shadowing and started to head back.

When I hurried after him, he went into the alleyway that I had been in until just a moment ago.

It was a trap.

Who knew for what purpose. But... This whole thing definitely had an ominous feeling to it. Stopping at the entrance of that line-like path that led into the back alley, I looked inward. Wouldn't it be possible to find out what they were doing from here?

Looking carefully, I saw someone standing there.

It was a wine-red long coat.

Was that slim-figured shadow of a guy?

His long hair was the color of gold, beside him was a black German shepherd. Even though I'm looking from a distance I could tell he had a condescending face, as if he were looking down on people.

But, who exactly was that guy?

"■■■■■■−−−−−−−−."

A fluent intonation flowed past my ears.

Surprised, I looked behind me, but no one was there. When I quickly turned back around to look at the alley, the man in the coat had disappeared.

A cold north wind blew through the street.

Brrrr, my body was shivering.

I hugged my body, which was still shaking oblivious to Enjou Tomoe's will, and resisted an urge to cry for no reason with all my might.

I was feeling the end of autumn and the end of my existence.

◇

Night had fallen, and I told Ryougi about the fact that she was being stalked. I told her how the creeps from that night were actively keeping watch on her.

But Ryougi's reply was brief as usual.

"Oh, really?"

"So?", she asked, with her flawlessly clear eyes.

Even had I lost my grip on reason this time around.

"It's not something you go 'so?' to! It's not just those jerks watching you! Do you have any memories of a foreigner wearing a red coat?"

"I don't have any delightful friends like that."

That was it for Ryougi, and she didn't respond to this story any longer.

What happened was that she had lost interest. No matter what effect an incident would have on Ryougi Shiki, if Ryougi Shiki herself thought it was unimportant, this brat would ignore it. Even if she was to be disgraced and treated like a murderer, she probably wouldn't care. Since what was important to her wasn't what the world thought, but how she felt.

... Yeah, I was expecting her to be like that too. I thought that Ryougi, for whom that was natural, was proudly lonely; but this time at least, was an exception.

Those creeps – no, but that guy was real.

He had the same pure, unadulterated dreadfulness as Ryougi, not the kind of fake or manufactured danger like me or those creeps.

"Listen to me! This isn't somebody else's business. It involves none other than yourself! At least spare some thought for my concerns!"

My shouting may have annoyed her, as the kimono girl nimbly turned around while cross-legged on the bed and looked up at me. At that time, I think I was wearing a very serious face. It wasn't even because Ryougi was so preposterously unworried. The reason was a bit more simple. It was–

"Mm, it definitely is my business and not someone else's. But why are you worrying about my problem, Enjou?"

Well, it was...

"Idiot, of course I'm worried. I don't want you to die. Because, I've fallen for you."

The taut air had suddenly froze.

... I said it. I, who must leave soon, had said what must not be said. Those words, above everything else for myself, were something that should not have been said. Ryougi was

looking at me as if she was seeing something strange. A few seconds passed, the kimono girl bursted into laughter.

“Hahaha, what are you saying, Enjou!? You’ve fallen for me? Did that guy in the red coat hypnotize you or something? Try going through your memory, there will definitely be some weird noises mixed up in there!”

Ryougi Shiki... had laughed it off and would not face me.

I don’t know what proof she might have had, but she definitely concluded that it couldn’t be real. As for me, obviously I couldn’t accept that.

“It’s not like that! I’m being sincere. Seeing you, for the first time I felt that a human was beautiful, and I thought I had finally found someone like me. You’re real. If it’s for you, I can do anything.”

Grabbing Ryougi’s shoulders, I glared at her. Ryougi stopped laughing and turned around to look at me.

“Hmm, is that so?”

It was a dry tone.

Ryougi’s hand grabbed my sleeve. All of the sudden, I spun lightly around, as if I had become a piece of paper, and ended up laying flat on the bed. Ryougi was on top of me, holding a knife...

“Then, can you die for me?”

The knife blade touched my neck.

The light in Ryougi’s eyes hadn’t changed much.

She stabbed down the knife like usual, she would kill me on a whim. Ryougi wasn’t asking if I could die doing something for her. She was saying, “I’m going to kill you for my enjoyment.” That was what the question meant.

This girl couldn’t feel affection except through something like that.

I was afraid of dying. Even now, I was so scared that I couldn’t even tremble. But... this life of mine didn’t have much time left anyway. Having killed someone, I’m bound to be caught by the police and never be able to return to this place again. In that case–

“All right. I’ll die for you.”

I said it.

Ryougi’s eyes regained a humane light.

“Do as you like, I haven’t got long left anyway. Since I killed my parents, it will probably be an execution. If that’s the case, I think dying by your hand is better than the gallows.” “You killed your parents?”

With her knife pressed against my throat, Ryougi asked me again. I decided then to reveal the memories I had hidden, and tell the story just before I died. That was probably because I wanted to at least pretend to be at a confession at least once before I died.

"Yeah. I killed my parents. Because they were bad parents, they borrowed money behind my back and went around having fun. I couldn't handle taking care of them anymore, so I wildly stirred up their organs with a kitchen knife. I did it over and over again so that I wouldn't screw up and have it end at attempted murder. Our house doesn't even have heating. That night was cold too, right? Their breath was steaming white, but a human's intestines are warm. Steam coming from a human's stomach, that's a sight that you might only see once in your life!

"Heh heh, seriously, everything was paralyzed and I might have gone mad. I hadn't put the knife down, and I kept digging into those guts. Eventually, it got to the point where you couldn't tell whether I had stabbed them to kill them or to dig into their guts, and you could no longer tell that those things had once been human."

Should I have cried? I thought about it, but the tears wouldn't come. Instead, I felt strangely refreshed. By the fact that I had killed those awful parents and was really free.

"Tomoe. You... why did you kill them?" asked the girl in front of my eyes. I thought about it. Why did I kill them? Did I hate them? Or were they annoying? No, it wasn't such a clean emotion.

In that case, was I... Afraid?

"I... was afraid. I had... a dream. I came home from work and went to bed. Shortly afterward, I heard my mom and dad arguing in the room beside mine, and the door opened. My father was covered in blood and my mother was standing there. Just like that, she stabbed me to death, then cut her own throat and died.

"At first I thought 'I'm going to die like this' but it wasn't like that. When I woke up in the morning, no such thing had happened. I must have had dreams like that because I definitely wanted to kill my parents but couldn't. Also, I had that dream every day. Every, single, day, that dream repeated itself. I call it a dream, but every day? I couldn't stand it anymore. I... was more afraid of the night, when I would get murdered. I didn't want to have dreams like that anymore. So, all that happened was that I killed them before I was murdered, in order that I might never have a dream like that again."

Yeah, that night. My mother, who had opened the door because she had something to talk about; I stabbed her over and over again with the knife I had hidden. I lost count of the number of times I had been killed in my dreams. I tried my hardest to kill her, as if I was pouring out all the frustration that had been building up inside of me until then.

I was free. There was no reason for me to be chained down by such awful parents, or such unpleasant dreams.

Dammit, what an unclean freedom.

"You are an idiot."

Ryougi spoke solemnly. Her cold tone conversely made me feel refreshed.

It really did. I'm stupid so I couldn't think of any other way to run away, but I don't regret it. Even if I was bound to be caught by the police, I would still feel better than I did in those nightmare-filled days.

... But, there was one little thing. It was something I realized as I told my story.

Until now, I have lived thinking that only I was important. Even supposing if such a person was serious, to say that they had fallen for someone wasn't something they could do... They didn't have the right to do that. It was natural that Ryougi would just laugh it off. Still... At least the fact that I wanted to protect this girl was real. It was the only real thing to this false me. But even that thought became polluted in the hands of a dirty murderer like me. If I had any regrets, that would be what I regretted most right now.

The moment I understood that. The fever that had been driving me towards a violent outburst rapidly cooled off, like an old TV that had been replaced and thrown out.

"But even so."

I... didn't regret that murder.

Tomoe was saying in my head that the murder was not something he should have done.

Ryougi was looking at me with a far-off look in her eyes. It was an unblinking stare, as if it was piercing the heart of Enjou Tomoe's being.

"A drastic error. Enduring was your forte, but in the end, you chose the painful path. When we first met, you weren't you. Having lost your future, did the empty you want to die like just before?"

... The girl who tried to kill me on a whim.

... The girl who I thought I would be happy to be killed by.

The two threw the question at me.

... Let's see.

That night, I was handling myself recklessly. I thought it was perfectly fine to beat someone to death, and on the other hand, I thought it would be perfectly fine to be beaten to death. But... I didn't want to die. At the time, yeah... simply living had become exhausting. I hated myself; a fake existence without any goals in life. This self of mine that thought it wanted to die but couldn't even kill itself was so loathsome that I couldn't take it.

Even now, when I had confessed all my sins to Ryougi like this, I didn't want to die. But nonetheless, humans will ultimately die. For me it would just be a little quicker, a little shabbier, and less meaningful than another person's.

... Was that it? That was probably what I couldn't stand. A worthless, stale death.

If I was going to die like that, I would rather–

"–Dying for you seems much more real, so I prefer it."

"No thanks. A life like yours, I don't need it."

The knife dropped. Like a cat that had lost interest in its prey, Ryougi distanced herself from me. Was she going out somewhere? Ryougi picked up her leather jacket and prepared to leave.

I could only watch her.

"Hey, Enjou. Where's your house?"

Ryougi's voice was cold like the time when I first met her.

... My family went from rental to rental. We were chased around usually because after half a year we wouldn't be able to pay the rent, or the harassment of the debt collectors would be too much to take. I hated that, I hated that from when I was young, so I envied a normal household.

"What are you going to do with the answer? It's number four zero five in some apartment complex."

"I'm not talking about that. I mean the home you want to return to. If you don't know, that's fine."

Ryougi opened the door.

As she went out, the girl spoke without even looking back.

"Well, I'm going. If you feel like it you can use this place again."

Ryougi disappeared.

I found myself left behind, alone, this place seemed to have become so bleak that it looked like the only colors were white and black.

While I looked at the room, that had become totally black and white, the room where I had stayed for a month with my rusty mind, I decided to leave.

/5 (Spiral Paradox, 1)

Winter had arrived.

Like my summer, the autumn that came to these streets seemed to have been short as well.

Looking out from the office window, the streets were overcast by a cold sky that threatened to snow at any time. Day by day the traces of autumn disappeared to the point where one began to think the abnormal weather had erased the word autumn from the list of seasons.

That's right. In the short period from the end of September to this day of November seventh, I had ran through life like a prized racehorse.

To speak of my life during that time, from the start of October, I was at a driving school ran by one of my relatives. This school was like a boarding school where students stay for three weeks and finish a normal course in a shorter space of time.

Leaving this street for nearly a month didn't appeal to me, but I couldn't turn down my relative's offer and Touko-san, my boss at work, approved the trip. So I ended up having no choice but to go. My three weeks in the school, which felt like a concentration camp in some ways, finished and I came back to this place, where I was born and grew up.

"... Mmm, name: Kokutou Mikiya."

For no reason at all, I read the contents on the license in my hand.

My name was clearly printed on the small license. Apart from that, my registration location, my birth date, current address, and a photo of my face were on it. There was really only a minimal amount of personal information entered on it .but among all the proofs of identity an individual could possess, it was the one with the greatest range of uses. That point was just so strange that I couldn't stand it.

"What kind of qualification would like a license be, Touko-san?"

I addressed Touko-san, who was sleeping on the bed in one corner of the same room. Of course, I didn't expect anything like a response.

"It's a contract, that thing."

However, Touko-san kindly responded.

This person caught a horrible cold and had already spent nearly a week lying in bed. She was sleeping till a moment ago with a thirty-eight degree fever, but it seemed she just woke up.

The most probable reason was that she was hungry. It was reasonable, the time was already past noon.

Right now, I was at the company office. To be accurate, this was Touko-san's personal room, which was on the fourth floor of the building where the office was. This room was a place I didn't normally frequent. Having moved the chair to be by the window, I was looking at the license I got only a short time ago while Touko-san was lying in bed.

... Nevertheless this wasn't an erotic situation. It was simply that Touko-san was lying in bed with a cold. What awaited me when I got back from the boarding school was a Shiki who silently condemned me for something, and my boss who was in bed with a cold.

These two people claimed to have become friendlier in the time I was away, but Shiki flatly refused to nurse Touko-san, and I think she even went so far as to say something along the lines of, "I hope your brain melts away."... Shiki, who displayed the same coldness as ever, was a friend of mine from high school. Full name, Ryougi Shiki. Sex, female. Her manner of speaking was rough so now and then there were people who confused her gender.

On the other hand, the woman in front of me, who had a cold towel upon her head, was called Aozaki Touko and was the boss of the company where I worked. I was the only employee, so it's a little awkward to call it a company.

This person had a genius's nature and, as those kinds of people sometimes do, had few acquaintances. Even after catching a cold, she said that she didn't do anything and laid in bed for the whole day. The person in question was saying that it couldn't be helped, since she didn't have an immunity to this cold at the current time or some nonsense like that.

... Personally, I think that if you didn't have any immunity it wasn't really the time to be sleeping, but as a Magus Touko-san probably didn't feel like seeing a doctor. No doubt the thing called pride was stopping her.

Due to those circumstances, I couldn't really meet up with Shiki after a month away and ended up nursing Touko-san for the whole day.

A contract. Weakly uttering her reply, Touko-san picked up the glasses on the bedside table.

Normally, she seemed so sinister that one wouldn't quite notice that she was a beautiful woman, but the current Touko-san, who was suffering from a cold, was so gentle and pretty that you could think she was someone else.

Touko-san kept talking in order to clear her still drowsy consciousness.

"That, you see, is a contract saying you have mastered driving. It says that you have learned something important, but the objective has changed. In this country, it's no longer a matter of getting a qualification as a result of learning, but learning in order to get the qualification. When you obtain the qualification, what you learned loses its meaning. A qualification which has degraded to merely being evidence saying 'I have learned this much' is like a contract."

Touko-san raised herself up and added, “Does the chicken come first, or the egg?”

“But isn’t a qualification something like that? After all, everyone studies with a goal in mind.”

“Of course, there are always opposites. It’s a topic with no conclusion because goals and results, behaviors and processes are dissociated things. There will be people who start driving because they got a license, just as there will be those who, while they get their driver’s license, skip any instruction and take the exam right away.”

She normally spoke gently when she had her glasses on, but she was even more gentle than usual today, maybe because she was sick.

I digress, but when this person went to take the test, she had gotten such flawless results in the written and practical tests that she apparently got her license while being glared at by the examiner.

“I did hear about people getting a license without going to a driving school, and I see Touko-san was such a case... Speaking of which, the image of you going to a driving school is just...”

So scary, I couldn’t imagine it.

Apparently unamused by my hastily swallowed comment, Touko-san frowned and looked sharply in my direction.

“Isn’t that a discourtesy Mikiya-kun? In those days I was still a student, so there would have been nothing strange about me going to a driving school if I chose to. I was no different from any ordinary university student.”

Touko-san talked with her eyes closed, as if she was complaining.

“... That’s right. Now that I think about it, Touko-san was once a teen too–”

Imagining what she would have looked like as a lovable young girl still in her studies; I couldn’t help but swallow my breath because that was a mental attack strong enough to squeeze my heart.

“–That picture seems a whole lot more abnormal ma’am.”

“You are slowly revealing your true sentiments while the other party is a patient, aren’t you?”

Of course. Usually I was the one that kept getting picked on, so if I didn’t at least retaliate at a time like this, things wouldn’t balance out. When I stood up to replace the towel for her, Touko-san said she was hungry, revealing a very frank craving. Distressingly, the porridge that was made for her ran out this morning.

“Shall I go an buy something from the store? Say, udon with eggs?”

“Nooope, I’m tired of eating that. Hey, Mikiya-kun, won’t you make something for me? You live alone, so you know how to cook right?”

There was an idea that if you lived alone then you knew how to cook, but who had spread that groundless rumor? Letting my shoulders slump under Touko-san’s anticipatory gaze, I firmly declared to her the harsh truth.

"Sorry, the only things I can make are noodles. The lowest rank consisting of pouring hot water into a cup of instant noodles, and the highest rank being pasta. If that's okay I will use the kitchen for a bit."

As expected, Touko-san wore a bluntly disgusted face.

"Then where did you get this morning's porridge from? It was a taste that couldn't have come from a convenience store."

"That was Shiki's. She says that she doesn't cook very often, but it turns out she's pretty skilled when it comes to Japanese food."

"Eh?" Touko-san spoke and blinked in surprise.

I was of that opinion too, but really, Shiki had cooked well enough to shame a chef. Shiki came from a distinguished family, and because of that her sense of taste was extraordinarily high class. For herself, she would eat anything; but I think that was because if she didn't make it, then she could forgive any taste. Shiki cooking meant preparing something that she herself could tolerate, so it was really no wonder that her cooking skills went up as a result.

"How surprising, Shiki doing something for me. But well, that fits. Since that kid is adept at using a knife... I suppose it can't be helped. There are some bottles of pills on the desk, so can you get them for me?"

Realizing she couldn't get a meal off of me, Touko-san lay back on the bed. When I went to get the three medicine bottles on Touko-san's desk, a photo had caught my attention.

It looked like a scene from a foreign land. A brick road and a clock tower that looked as if it could come from a movie. Beneath a gray sky, that looked as if it would start snowing at any moment, three people were standing next to each other.

Two men and a girl.

Both men were of tall stature and one seemed Japanese. The other person looked native to that land and fit in so well with the scenery that there was no sense of incongruity about him. No, it was actually that the presence of the Japanese man was so strong. The sense of existence that flowed from that Japanese man, standing there with a dark expression, was so powerful it rose up from the picture... It was a heaviness so strong that it became hard to breathe. I once felt it close up.

That was, yeah. Could it have just been a sensation from that unforgettable time? While I gazed at the photo to try and confirm that, something even more striking caught my eye.

The Japanese man was wearing a coat reminiscent of a black kimono, and the handsome blond man, with blue eyes, was in a red coat.

There was a girl standing between those two.

Ebon black hair which made the black coat of the Japanese man look pale. The hair flowed down below her waist, rather than hair it seemed like some wonderfully beautiful decoration.

A calm face that still tinged with the innocence of childhood; in one word I could describe it as radiant. The girl was so excessively beautiful that it felt like she would snatch away my

soul through the photo. One would be provoked into wondering if mixing a Japanese ghost, with the beauty of a flower blooming in the shadows, and a fairy from a western fairy tale would result in a human like this.

"Touko-san, this photo."

Without even realizing it, I was mumbling those words.

Touko-san took off her glasses as she replied.

"Oh? Ah, those are people I knew from long ago. I couldn't remember what they looked like, so I took that out of my album. Around the time I was in London, it was a unique mistake."

Whenever Touko-san took off her glasses, her manner of speaking was the first thing to change. Previously, my friend Ryougi Shiki had a somewhat obscure dual personality, but this person called Aozaki Touko really did change identities, as if flicking a switch. She said that it was actually her personality and not her identity that changed, but from my perspective it didn't really matter what it was.

To sum up the Touko-san who had taken off her glasses in one phrase, she was a cold person.

A cold mode of behavior and speech, a cold ideology, and a cold reason; an image of humanity formed from those sorts of things, that was Touko-san without glasses.

"I guess it's a few years back now. Around the time when my little sister was entering high school, roughly eight years ago now. Remembering people's faces is my specialty, but for some reason I'm poor at recalling those memories. And I don't feel like tidying it up into a nice shape either since it's a pointless exercise."

Still lying on the bed, Touko-san kept talking as if she was absorbed in thought... For Touko-san to be talking about her past, it wasn't something you saw very often. I think it was true when she said that this was her first time catching a cold. I guess sick people do act differently.

"London, that's the capital of England right?"

Putting the three medicine bottles at the head of Touko-san's bed, I pulled up a nearby chair and sat down next to the bed. Touko-san took out some pills from the bottles and swallowed them, then laid down and started talking.

"Yes. At the time, having run away from my grandfather, there was nowhere for me to go. I calculated that there was nothing else for an amateur Magus, who didn't even have the skills or the resources to make a Workshop, to do but go under the wing of a large organization. It's like a university. The equipment is worn, defaced, and failing, but there's nothing wrong with the establishment itself. In the shadows of the British Museum, there was a western-eastern ancient and modern age research department. Of course it was actually the Association that nourished so many of today's Magi. That was also a treasury beyond my wildest hopes."

Soliloquizing as if dazed by the fever, Touko-san's complexion kept getting paler. When I got worried thinking that those pills might have been poison instead of medicine, Touko-san assured me that they weren't poison.

“It’s a good opportunity, so just let me talk a little longer... It was difficult for a girl not yet twenty to study abroad, especially since an Aozaki gets treated like a heretic. In order to enter that place I decided to specialize in Rune Magecraft. At the time Runes weren’t popular, and there were few people studying it. the Association needed researchers too, so they let me in. Stabilizing the Rune characters from that side took me two years, and another few years to approach the originals in the Thule Society, so it may have been about the time I just got my own Workshop.

“One day, while I was absorbed in making the puppet that was my goal, I met that man. Someone who possessed a unique personal history, like originally being a Taimitsu Monk. He was a hellish man. His strong will and tempered shell, it was like an eternally burning drive for achievement.

“... Hellish. What I mean by saying that, Kokutou, is that if the idea of Hell was to gain a will and take the form of a man, my hypothesis is that it would be something like him. To the degree that he couldn’t accept others, he was just absorbing misery. His ability as a Magus was full of flaws, but his strong ego surpassed everything. And yet, I liked that clumsy guy.”

As if she’s looking at the man in her memories, Touko-san thinly opened her eyes. Her look was an undecipherable one that looked of either hatred or compassion. Without even really knowing the contents of the story very well, I said, “Oh, that’s how it was,” and agreed with her. Not annoying the patient is the main point behind nursing.

“Ahh, so Touko-san’s doll making is a foreign art?”

To that question which was perfectly unsuited to the mood, Touko-san said, “Yes it is,” and nodded seriously.

Listening to Touko-san’s muttering was fine, but not being able to understand what it meant made me feel sorry as a listener. That was why I would prefer that she tell this kind of story to Shiki or Azaka, but the fever-addled Touko-san raised the gear on the story’s incomprehensibility.

“The reason I got into doll making you see, was to reach「 」through the perfect human body.

“Adversely he chose to try and reach「 」through the soul, or in other words, an existence that is「there」but「not there」, like a cat inside an unfathomable box. The box has a definite form, so you can’t see inside it, but the formless soul can be seen into. It’s similar to the collective unconscious some psychologist proposed. He probably thought that if he felt his way along that chain, he would eventually reach the heart.

“Ah, but you see, we both were trying for the original work. The one original, you could call it humanity’s individuality. Modern humans have become so divided that their lineages and attributes are already impossible to divine. Therefore it’s impossible to reach the origin. Lineages and attributes; or in other words fate. It’s like a number form, so a life only achieves a certain result if this ability and that role is poured in. A life that can only achieve this result. It’s natural, since the genes have only been granted those abilities. If you call that fate then it will be fate.

“The pinnacle of creation has become too complicated. Probably as a result of being invested with too many abilities after pursuing omnipotence. The genes that are the data

which form a human are nothing more than four different bases, but the simple spiral formed by stacking those four types of bases has fallen into the paradox that, by being piled up till it was impossible to measure, it really has become impossible to measure.

“So, I decided that the only thing to do was to make it myself, although the result was cruel. No matter how hard I tried, the only thing I could make was a perfect me.”

The medicine must have started working as the color returned to Touko-san’s cheeks.

The eyes that were staring into the air too, their focus got steadily blurred.

“But, that person will still be going on. The guy that looked toward humanity’s ‘Origin’, he said that he got expelled by his teacher while searching for the form of the soul... There must be some sort of karma, for him to be getting involved in this kind of thing at this point. Do you understand, Kokutou? I’ll warn you beforehand: no matter what happens, do not approach the man in the photo.”

Touko-san spoke as if squeezing out the last dregs of her strength, then she fell asleep straight away.

Her slight chest moved up and down, repeating quiet breaths. The medicine had definitely taken effect, and she had fallen asleep. Changing the wet towel on Touko-san’s forehead, I left the room so as not to wake her.

There was no one in the office next door.

Only a high toned noise could be heard from the factories around the building. Feeling that trailing noise on my skin I muttered to myself.

“Don’t approach him? I can’t, Touko-san. You see, I knew that guy two years ago.”

But what significance that fact had, I couldn’t know. No, I’m not even sure if the person who helped me then was the guy in the photo. Inside me, that person in the photo was unidentifiable, and the fever-ridden Touko-san’s words were scattered around like puzzle pieces.

Uncertain things call out uncertain words. It was only that, but the air that was calm till just now thinned out, and it felt like I’d run out of oxygen.

An uneasiness I can’t express with words sent a shiver down my spine.

/6 (Spiral Paradox, 2)

One night had passed, and it was now noon on the eighth of November. The cloudy sky was no different from yesterday, so the lightless office was dark, like an abandoned ruin.

This office was too big for just two people; Touko-san and I to use. There were enough desks for ten people, and there was a sofa to receive clients too. With a floor of concrete, as bare as it was on the day it was poured, and walls that haven't even been papered over, it wasn't much, but nevertheless, if the numbers were met it would look like a proper workplace.

But, at this moment, there were only three people here including me.

Touko-san could not be seen at the chief's desk beside the window. The medicine she took yesterday must have been effective, because as soon as she woke, and found the cold had gone, she went out somewhere.

Inside this office without a director, I was ordering materials with which to decorate the hall where the art exhibition would be starting next month while comparing prices and doing other such things. I was doing this in order to obtain the materials needed for her craft at low prices, while holding Touko-san's specifications in one hand. That person was the type to say, "It's all right as long as I make it," so she didn't end up putting in this kind of annoying and bothersome effort. The result was that as her employee, I couldn't help but do it for her.

Peering at the list of material suppliers, I rang up a place for that and negotiated, then I moved onto yet another shop. Apart from me, who couldn't decide whether I was busy or just dedicated, there were two other people here.

One was the kimono girl sitting blankly on the guest sofa. Needless to say, it was Ryougi Shiki, and while she wasn't doing anything, she was sitting there in a polite manner.

The other person was sitting, facing me at the desk furthest away from my own, doing... something. A schoolgirl in a black uniform. The girl with the long hair which was the polar opposite of Shiki's slung over her back, she was called Kokutou Azaka.

Needless to say, the fact that our last names were the same meant we were blood relatives, and as my little sister, Azaka was a first-year high school student. She had a weak constitution, so she was given over to a relative's house around the time she was ten, for the

reason that the city air was not good for her body; after that we only met a few times. I think the last time I saw her was New Year's Day the year I entered high school. At the time she was still a child, but when I saw the Azaka who returned this summer, I was quite surprised. The little sister I faced, for the first time in ages, had grown into a lady with such a noble air about her as to make me wonder if her genes came from our family.

As expected, I think that with just a change of environment from the house where one was born, that thing called a human could grow up beautifully.

Her actions had become spirited, too, so there was no trace of her former frailty. The fact that I wasn't with her during that period of growth from the ages of ten to fifteen might have been a factor, but for a while I couldn't accept the fact that this girl was my little sister Azaka.

I stole a glance at Azaka, sitting at the far-off desk.

With a number of books thicker than a dictionary stacked up beside her, she was copying down the contents studiously and quietly... It was the study material Touko-san left for Azaka as she went out.

The heavy conversation yesterday with Touko-san put me in a gloomy mood as well, but my current greatest worry might be this:

"Nii-san. I'm going to become Touko-san's apprentice."

Whatever she was thinking, one month ago Azaka said such a thing. Of course I protested, but my little sister was determined and would not listen to my opinion... Honestly. Why does a weird thing like a Magician have to come out of an exceedingly normal family like ours?

"Azaka."

I called to my little sister who was sitting in front of me, the phone orders put aside for now.

Azaka finished writing the sentence she was copying, and then with her black hair rippling about her head, raised her face toward me. Her eyes, which were calm and dignified, in spite of being full of a proud temper, politely looked this way as if asking, "What is it?"

"I know that it's a holiday since it's your school's foundation day. But even so, is it okay for you to be in a place like this?"

"Nii-san, please visit the house once in a while. There was a fire in the school dormitory, so right now it's in ruins. Mother knows that there was a request from the school for students with homes nearby to leave the dormitories if possible for now."

With eyes and a voice that reminded me of the school president from my high school days, she knocked aside my question.

"A fire, one big enough for the whole dorm to burn?"

"Only on the east wing. Half of the first and second year dorms were burnt to ashes. Although it didn't appear on the news because the school hushed it up."

Azaka said something shocking in a firm tone.

A fire breaking out at a famous girls' school like Reien was definitely something that could turn into a scandal, regardless of the truth behind the matter. However, if we were talking about Reien, which took pride in the affection its powerful alumnae felt for the school, they might be able to take care of a fire in secret.

But for a fire to occur at a school dormitory, it was a horrible thought. It was also easy to imagine from what Azaka said that it was arson, by a student at that.

"Nii-san. You aren't getting any strange ideas, are you?"

Azaka glared at me, as if she read my mind.

... Because of that event over the summer, my little sister didn't like Kokutou Mikiya sticking his head into suspicious events. A silent argument always occurred following a conversation like this, so I decided to try and change the subject.

"That aside. What are you doing right now?"

"It's nothing to do with you, Nii-san."

As if she knew what I wanted to say, Azaka's reply was chilly.

"It does have something to do with me. I mean, my sister wants to be a Magician! What am I supposed to say to Father?"

"Oh, you are planning to drop by the house?"

... Ugh. Little rascal, she knew perfectly well that our parents and I had cut our ties after we argued.

"Speaking of which, Nii-san. A Magician and a Magus are different things. How can you not know about that when you work for Touko-san?"

Now that I think about it, Touko-san did sometimes say something like that. Something along the lines of how it was convenient to advertise yourself as a Magician rather than a Magus, as it presented the kind of image that you wanted to amateurs, but that those were the titles of two completely different things, or something like that.

"Ah, I did hear that before. But there wasn't much difference that I could see. They both use suspicious magic."

"Magic and Magecraft are different. The art we call Magecraft, it's definitely something outside our everyday reality. In the end, though, it's still nothing more than making something, that is possible normally, happen under extraordinary circumstances. Should I give you an example?"

Azaka walked over to Touko-san's desk, then picked up a letter opener that was lying there. A piece of silverware of excellent craftsmanship, it was one of Touko-san's most frequently handled items. Taking out an unneeded document, Azaka wrote something on it with the knife. Suddenly, the document began to burn away spewing thick clouds of smoke.

"....."

Unable to speak, I just stared at the scene. Touko-san had done something of the like before, although on a larger scale, but I didn't know what to say at seeing my little sister do that sort of thing.

"Stop that. That, is there some kind of trick to it?"

"Of course there is. It might look amazing to someone who didn't know about it, but it's really nothing special. What I did just now doesn't even qualify as an ability. If you are going to set something on fire, a disposable lighter will do the trick. Whether you do it with a lighter or a finger, the fact that you are setting an object on fire is the same. That kind of thing isn't miraculous at all, is it? Do you understand, Nii-san? Magecraft is like that."

Azaka continued on confidently. In short, Magecraft seemed to be equivalent to a substitute good for civilization. No, from what Azaka said, it may be more accurate to say it had been overtaken by civilization.

"Take making it rain, for example. Whether it's through science or Magecraft, the result is indistinguishable. It's just that the method is different; the amount of effort that goes into it is nearly the same. Magecraft may appear to be the work of an instant, but the preparatory steps required are extensive. If you take the time and money spent, it's nearly equivalent to making the rain clouds with science. In the past, that really was something close to a miracle. By today's standards, however, it's not a miracle or anything of the sort. Previously, any Magus that could turn a whole village to ashes was hailed as a Magician, but these days if you have money, that's something anyone can do. All that is required is to throw one missile."

That method would actually be much faster and more effective, Azaka added.

"Magecraft is nothing more than making possible through your own strength what can be done now after spending a mind-boggling amount of time on the problem. It might be so even if you look at it academically. Rather than meditating for decades in order to obtain the truth, it might be faster to go to the moon and meditate there. It's frustrating, but even Magecraft of the 'taboo ritual' type cannot achieve miracles. A miracle is something beyond the powers of humanity, isn't it? Something currently unachievable in this world no matter how much money you throw at it. The ones who can make those things are called Magicians, and their art, Magic."

Something humans can't do yet. That is Magic, was what Azaka said.

"Then, wouldn't there have been more Magicians than Magi in the past? Since people in those days wouldn't have had lighters or missiles."

"You are right. That is why a Magician was a feared figure in the past, and why being one could even be called a job. These days, though, it's different, isn't it? Strictly speaking, there's no need for anything like Magecraft. These days, Magic itself is disappearing. After all, you can count on your fingers the number of things that are impossible for humanity, can't you? Whatever the case, they say that there are only about five Magicians in the world today."

... Sure enough. With those meanings there would be a difference between Magi and Magicians. If we were talking about things that humanity couldn't do currently, the only things would be the control of time and space. Seeing the future or the past isn't reliable,

but this was a time when such things was becoming possible, so impossibilities really are able to be counted on one hand.

Someday, humanity will eliminate the very existence of Magic. Kind of like how a child, who became a scientist because he was intrigued by a number of events he thought miraculous, loses that sense of wonder as he comes to think of those events as simple phenomena in the course of his research.

"Hmm. In that case, wouldn't the last Magic be something like the power to make everyone happy?"

Um, I can't say I knew much about all this.

"———"

For some reason, Azaka had shut herself up.

She appeared to look this way, with a face as if she was looking at something unexpected, but suddenly turned away.

"... Magic is something that can't be reached. And I never wanted to be a Magician. Learning Magecraft is just for the purpose of achieving my goals."

"Really? So Magic is out, but if it's Magecraft you'll learn it? That sounds like what you just said, Azaka."

When I summed up the talk by coming to that conclusion, Azaka shook her head, and said "No."

"What have you been listening to, Nii-san? Magecraft was Magic too in the past. All that happened was that humanity caught up to it, so using it and learning it has become possible with effort.

"... It's frustrating, but I don't have any built-up history like a Magus's family heritage. Those people we call Magi are families who build up their blood and history. The first of them would have been simple academics too. The mysteries that they have learned, and the strength they built up, they pass those on to the next generation. Their descendants continue their work, and pass it on to their own descendants. In this way, they repeat an endless cycle as they try to approach the bounds of Magic. Touko-san seems to be the sixth generation, but apparently the third generation heir of their family was an incredible genius and discovered some amazing things. I think Touko-san's gifts are a result of carrying that thick blood as well. People like me who are just starting to learn Magecraft now can't become Magi that easily."

"Hmm. Sounds like you are going to find it tough, for many reasons."

Mm, I had suddenly understood something.

Thick blood; the power of your bloodline. That was true for any family. To normal people it may be their many relatives, or the wealth they had inherited.

But, in the end, that–

"Hey, then what are you doing? Ours is a normal family. Never mind Magecraft, we've never even dipped into Buddhism. Wouldn't it be that we can't learn things like Magecraft?"

"That's correct, but apparently we have the potential. According to Sensei, the delicacy shown when I ignite something isn't very common."

Azaka spoke as if she was sulking... Honestly, what good was being able to set things on fire going to do her? It could even be that this girl was the one responsible for the fire in the student dormitory.

"Hey, you said it yourself that an ability that ends with one generation is useless. Then whatever you do is pointless. Even if you try to become a Magus instead of a Magician, it will end up no different in the end. If you don't come back to a normal path quickly, you won't even be able to find a job."

It's hard finding jobs these days as it is. Azaka immediately tried to refute that statement.

Before that could happen, an even more offensive piece of dialogue came leaping into the office with the sound of footsteps.

"No, getting a job won't be a problem. With that level of skill at her age, in just two years' time she'll be getting offers left and right. She could even be hired as a first-class curator."

With a loud whiffing noise, the door opened and Touko-san entered the room.

◇

Having shed her cold, Touko-san walked over to the chief's desk so briskly that you'd wonder if she was ever sick. Sitting down after hanging her coat on the chair, she looked at her desk and frowned. Probably because the location of the letter opener was different from before.

"Azaka, I told you not to use someone else's things. A person becomes dull if they rely upon tools. I suppose it was because you didn't want to fail in front of Kokutou, right?"

"Yes, you're right."

Upon being reprimanded by Touko-san, Azaka replied clearly, even as her cheeks became red with embarrassment... It was those things about her that deserved to be admired, even if she was my little sister.

"Well, you were having a pretty interesting talk. Weren't you disinterested in Magecraft before, Kokutou?"

"Of course I was, but... Oh, by the way, Touko-san. Do you remember yesterday?"

"Eh?" Having taken off her glasses, Touko-san cocked her head in confusion.

...That already mysterious conversation from last night, the one who had began it didn't even remember talking about it. Touko-san pulled out a cigarette and took a puff as she held it in her mouth.

"Anyway, Azaka. Why are you telling such things to Kokutou? Concealment and secrecy are the greatest prerequisites for Magecraft... Although, I suppose there wouldn't be any problems if the person you are talking to is Kokutou."

"What makes it okay if it's me?"

"You won't understand even if we tell you. There's no reason for the secret to escape either. Since you are the type that knows how to choose the topic depending on the person. You wouldn't talk about that kind of thing with a normal human."

"That may be so, but is it really not good for a Magus to be exposed to others?"

"Indeed, it's bad. Although it wouldn't really matter socially, the power of your Magecraft loses its bite. Do you know the origin of the word 'mystery', Kokutou?"

Touko-san asked that as she leaned forward on the desk.

"When you say mystery, do you mean the sort of mystery in mystery novels?"

"In a way. Not the detective novel sort, but mystery in the mystical sense."

"Yeah, I do. It's originally Greek, not English."

"... Well, that's true. In Greek it means to close something. Signifying stagnation, concealment, and self-completion. You see, a mystery has meaning in the fact that it is a mystery. Keeping it hidden is a nature of the technique. A Magecraft that has had its nature revealed can't become a mystery, no matter what kind of supernatural methods it uses. It's nothing more than another method. Once that happens, that Magecraft instantly becomes weaker.

"Magecraft was originally Magic too. In short, there was no question that the strength was pulled out from the Root; that was its source. Should we imagine for a moment that there was something along the lines of a 'mystery that makes you rich'? Let's say that this has a strength of ten. If only one person knows it, they can use the entire force of ten of its power. But if two people know it, then it gets halved into two units of five and gets used like that. See, it's gotten weaker, hasn't it? The way of expressing it may be different, but I think that this is a fundamental rule in regards to everything in this universe."

I couldn't understand all of what Touko-san was saying, but I think I get the point she was trying to convey. If concealment and obscurement were the laws of existence that thing called Magecraft existed by, I understood why Magi would be reluctant to reveal their Magecraft in front of others.

"In that case, you must do as you please where others can't see you, Touko-san."

"Nope, I don't."

Phffi, Touko-san started talking as she stubbed out the cigarette in her ashtray.

"I wouldn't have a choice in a battle between Magi, but otherwise I don't use it even if I'm alone. The only time I use Magecraft techniques is when it's required for a ritual, or in a ceremony in order to proceed to the next level.

"Some time around the medieval era or so, an organization called the Association was formed. Because of their excessive regulation of Magecraft, the Association foresaw the degeneration of Magi. So they took the power of their organization and turned Magecraft itself into something that is never revealed. What they did was to take a mystery that was visible and turn it into a mystery that no one knew about. As a result, mystery began to disappear from society.

"In order to strictly enforce this, the Association made numerous strict rules. For example, if a Magus pulls a civilian into a Magecraft phenomenon, the Association will dispatch an assassin to kill that Magus. This is done to destroy the entity that is harming the larger community of Magi... That's probably where the myth that a Magician that reveals himself to people loses his power came from.

"The Association tried to stop the degeneration of Magecraft by reinforcing the attribute of concealment, and as a result, those Magi that belonged to the Association came to not throw their Magecraft around with abandon.

"There were Magi who resented those restrictions and retreated into the countryside, but the Association holds enormous amounts of academic works and lands. Most of what a Magus requires to live as a Magus is monopolized by the Association. To not belong to the Association was to be the same as being the outcast in a village. If you wanted to do an experiment, all the spiritual lands with distorted ley lines were owned by the Association, and if you tried to learn Magecraft, you couldn't obtain any texts, so you couldn't learn anything. Therefore, a Magus who was not a member of the Association couldn't practice Magecraft even if they wanted to. That's the power of a multitude. In that respect, it's very impressive."

"Uh, Touko-san. In that case, does that mean I would have to join the Association too..?"

Azaka's hesitantly interrupting voice somehow held a note of unease.

"You don't have to, but doing so would be more convenient. It's not as if you can't come out once you go in. You are free to leave that place when you wish. Since they regard the fact that they aren't rulers very seriously."

"But in that case there's no meaning to their extraordinary levels of concealment. Magecraft would spread if those who have learned it enter the outside world."

Upon hearing Azaka's reasonable opinion, Touko-san went "Ahh,"and nodded.

"That's true. Actually, there are a lot of people who plan to study at the Association and gain power, then leave for the countryside. Such thoughts tend to disappear after about ten years, though. Because the Association is the optimal environment for leaning Magecraft. To go down to the countryside when everything a Magus needs is already around you, no one does that kind of stupid thing. Studying Magecraft is the foremost objective of a Magus. They don't think about using their power and the things they've learned. If they have that kind of time to spare, they use it to approach an even higher level of mystery. But since Azaka has a fundamentally different objective from us, you don't need to worry about being infected with the Association's poison even if you decide to join. If you are interested in reaching higher levels, it's a place that might be worth looking into."

Azaka knitted her eyebrows together as if it were troublesome. In the end, it appeared as though Azaka herself had no interest in doing something like that. To me, who didn't like the idea of his little sister studying abroad in a suspicious place like that, Azaka's pondering had come as a welcome relief.

"... I'll just ask one thing. What do you mean when you say that secrets are kept even within that Association?"

Unexpectedly, I heard something from the sofa. Over there was Shiki, who had been sitting there since before without a word. She was the type of person who didn't get involved in a conversation that she wasn't interested in, so until now she had been staring at the scenery outside the window.

"There is that. A Magus won't reveal the results of his experiments even within the Association. What the person next to them is researching, what their goals are, and what they have obtained are all a mystery. The only time a Magus will reveal the results of their work is when they are passing it on to their descendants just before they die."

"Studying for their benefit alone, yet not using that power for their own sake? What purpose is there in a life like that, Touko? Is it that the goal is to learn, and the process is to learn too? If the only things you have are the beginning and the end, that's the same as having a zero."

... As usual, Shiki talked like a guy with that fine and clear feminine voice of hers. Touko-san appeared to have a faint bitter smile on her face, as if Shiki's biting remarks had hit a nerve somewhere.

"There is a goal. However, what you said is correct too. A Magus is pursuing a zero. His life is pointing towards something that never existed in the first place. A Magus's ultimate goal, you see, is to reach the 'Swirl of the Root'. It's also called the Akashic Records, but it may be better to just regard the edge of the swirl as having such properties attached to it.

"The thing called the Swirl of the Root, it is probably the birthplace of everything. All phenomena flow out from it. If you know the origin, the results are naturally produced. To describe it as it is, you could say that it's the 'perfect knowledge'. By creating a standard like perfection or the like, we are ultimately limiting the concept, so even that description is incorrect. But since that's the easiest way of defining it, the name stuck.

"Essentially, all the branches of Magecraft that have spread throughout this world are nothing more than one branch of a small river flowing out from this swirl. This is the reason that every country has their own traditions and legends. The core is the same, but what decorates the exterior is the background of the one who understood that 'river'. Astrology, Alchemy, Kabbalah, Spiritualism, Runes; the list of traditions are endless. Their origins are the same, so in the end they hold the same final destination in mind. Because, they who have touched the tip of the stream that split off from the Swirl of the Root called Magecraft, they have imagined what lay before, the shape of the beginning.

"To reach the truth is the ultimate goal of all Magi. They don't have any desire for petty things like the meaning of life. All they want is to know the shape of pure truth. They are that collective of people. Those who abandon the self in order that they may gaze upon their souls, the multitude who can never be rewarded for their efforts. The world calls them Magi."

She spoke with a clear voice, Touko-san's gaze was sharper than ever. Her amber eyes flickered as if they were on fire.

... That may be so, but unfortunately, I couldn't understand even half of what was just said. I only understood one thing from that speech, so I decided to ask her about it.

"Uh, can I ask something? If there is an objective, wouldn't studying have a meaning as well? There's no point in not being rewarded... Oh, I see. No one has managed to reach it, have they?"

"There are some who did. We know that it exists because somebody managed to get there. Those Magics that still exist today are things left behind by the ones who got there. But, the ones who got to that side never came back. Magi who were great enough to leave their names behind in history were lost at the very moment they got to that point... There is one exception, a half-baked one, but that person was only half-baked, so we'll ignore them.

"Whether that place is such a wonderful world, or if it's a world you cannot escape once you get to it. Those are things no one knows. Without getting there themselves, that is. However, reaching it with the efforts of one generation is impossible. The reason Magi shed blood during their research, and pass the results of their work to their descendants, is to amplify their magical energy. It's nothing but a way of creating a descendant who can reach the Swirl of the Root. You see, many generations of Magi have already dreamed about reaching the Swirl of the Root, they died and passed on their work to their children. Who in turn added to it, and passed it onto their children. There's no end to it. They can never be compensated for it, either. Even if a family that has reached that point were to appear, it would probably be impossible, because there are meddlers."

In contrast with her words, which suggested hatred, Touko-san had let loose a dry laugh. In a manner that made it seem that she thought it was good that there was such a meddler in this world.

"Well, what I am saying is that it is simply not possible no matter which side you are on. Today's Magi can't reach the Swirl and impose a new system, a new branch of Magecraft."

Touko-san said this with a shrug, as if saying "that's the end of this long story". With that Azaka and I were unable to say anything, but Shiki alone pointed out the contradiction in Touko-san's story.

"What strange people. Why do you people continue, even though you know it's beyond you?"

"Who knows? Maybe all those people who call themselves Magi are those who were born without the ability to grasp the concept of 'impossible', or they're idiots who can't give up."

Touko-san cleanly acknowledged the statement with a shrug.

Seeing that, Shiki said "What, you already knew?" as if she was surprised.

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When an hour or so had passed after the end of the conversation, the office had regained its usual tranquility. It was getting to be about three in the afternoon, so as a break from work I brewed some coffee for everyone in the room. After getting some Japanese tea for Azaka, I sat back down at my desk.

As for my work, the overall schedule was set, and my paycheck for the month looked to be safe. The thought relaxed me as I drank the coffee. The sound of people sipping could be heard echoing through the quiet office.

Suddenly, as if she was trying to break the peaceful silence that permeated the room, Azaka aimed a preposterous question at Shiki.

"–Excuse me. Shiki-san is a guy, isn't he?"

... That was truly a hellish question, enough to almost make me drop my cup.

"–––"

That was true for Shiki, too. After taking her lips off the cup of coffee in her hands, she made a face which suggested she was offended, but at a loss for words at the same time. In her current state, she had no rebuttal for my idiotic little sister.

Seeing that as a sign of victory, Azaka continued.

"Since you aren't denying it, you must be acknowledging the fact. You are definitely a guy, Shiki-san."

"Azaka!"

Dammit. Unable to contain myself, I ended up jumping in. These kind of questions needed to be ignored, but in this particular case I wasn't in my right mind. I had gotten up confidently enough, but no suitable words came to mind. Without another word, I sat down again... I felt like a soldier from some defeated army.

"Don't fuss over unimportant details, you."

In a very angry voice, Shiki gave Azaka a reply. Seeing as how she was rubbing her temple with one hand, it could be that she was trying contain her temper.

"Really? But this is a very important matter."

Like Shiki, who was always outwardly cool, Azaka responded coolly as well. With her elbows upon the desk and her fingers laced, Azaka's appearance was that of a chairman conducting a meeting.

"An important matter, you say. There's not much difference whether I'm a boy or a girl. It doesn't have anything to do with you, Azaka. Or are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

"Something like that would have been decided from our very first meeting."

It felt like the two were glaring at each other, even though neither was looking at the other person... As for me, I would like to know what had been decided, but this wasn't the sort of mood in which I could ask that question.

"... Azaka. I don't know why you feel you must bring this up again after all this time, but in the hopes that it will be the last time I will say it again. Shiki is a girl, definitely."

That one statement, which was meant to cover up Azaka's rudeness while restraining Shiki's displeasure, for some reason, felt like it scraped both their nerves even more raw than before I had said it.

"I know something like that. Keep quiet for a second, Nii-san."If you knew, then why were you asking!?

"What I want to ask isn't her physical sex. All I want to confirm is what side her psychological sex leans towards. Although, superficially at least, Shiki-san seems like a man."

Stressing the word "seems", Azaka looked at Shiki out of the corner of her eyes. Shiki had gotten more and more disgruntled.

"If my body's a girl's, it doesn't matter what side my personality is. What will you do if I am a guy, brat?"

"I wonder, do you want me to introduce you to a girl from Reien?"

"___"

Hearing Azaka's words that were no longer dancing around the issue and had become a straight-out challenge, I finally understood. Was Azaka still not letting go of what happened on that night two years ago?

On the Chinese New Year during my first year of high school. There was a time, as Shiki and I were heading home after visiting a temple together, when I invited Shiki over to my house. Azaka had just gotten home for the winter holidays, and was somewhat shocked when she was confronted with Shiki. That wasn't unexpected either. At the time, Shiki still had another personality called SHIKI. After coming face to face with Shiki's voice and way of acting, which had been even closer to the picture of a healthy young man, Azaka had fallen ill for a whole day.

Even so, she had gone too far just now. I couldn't help her even if she got beaten up by Shiki.

"You know, Azaka..."

At exactly the same time as I stood up again to glare at Azaka, Shiki had gotten up from the sofa.

"I'll pass. There are no good women in Reien."

Hmph, Shiki snorted, and then she just left the office.

The navy kimono swished as it disappeared from my field of vision.

I thought about running after her, but that could all too easily have had the effect of pouring oil upon the fire of Shiki's displeasure instead. Thanking the gods for the miracle that nothing had happened, I sat down and drained the now cool coffee in one shot.

"How disappointing, you avoided me after all."

Tch. Clicking her tongue, Azaka loosened her posture and stretched her arms as she leaned her body on the backrest of her chair. It was as if she had been in a ready-to-fight state until now as well.

... I've always thought this, but why did Azaka's personality take a turn for the worse whenever she talked with Shiki? This time, though, I felt that I couldn't let things pass without saying something to her.

"Azaka. What was that just now?"

"What do you mean, what? It's all because the relationship between Nii-san and Shiki-san isn't clear. Haven't you ever had any thoughts like that? Whether Ryougi Shiki is befriending Nii-san as a girl, or as a guy?"

While her manner of speech was stern, Azaka was blushing as she talked. Because of that imbalance, I realized the point my little sister was trying to make.

"Azaka, we call that an idiot's conjecture. Whether Shiki is a girl or a boy, it's not something for us to use as a conversation topic. And furthermore, Shiki is originally a girl, so even if her way of thinking is that of a guy, it doesn't make much difference, does it?"

Azaka narrowed her eyes and glared at me.

"Okay then. So what Nii-san is saying is that as long as she's a girl there aren't any real problems. In other words, you think that relationships between the same sex are wrong. In that case, answer me this. Let's say that here we have a man who has become a woman through a sex change and a woman who has become a man by the same method. In the event that both these people truly love Nii-san, who would you choose? The one whose appearance is that of a woman but is really a man inside, or the one whose body is that of a man but whose mind is a woman's? Now, give me an answer."

... Azaka's question was... difficult.

The more I thought about it, the more it became evident that it was a situation in which you cannot choose either side.

If I just thought about it casually, of course I would choose the person whose sex was female over the one who was originally a woman but now had the body of a man. But that person's mind was still that of a man, so it led on to mean that person who liked Kokutou Mikiya was a man.

I couldn't trivialize the matter to the point where I was able to think that a person's sex didn't matter in love. In that case, however, it meant that I recognized men and women only by their outward appearance, so I started to feel that I was an ugly person inside. On top of that, relationships between the same sex were prohibited from the beginning. So a situation in which a man loved Kokutou Mikiya as a man wasn't acceptable either. Then the one I would choose would have to be the one who liked me as a woman, but that person's sex was male. Aahh, why do I have to hurt my head over a question like this!?

... Wait a second. This, wasn't there something paradoxical about it from the start? If you don't accept a relationship between people of the same sex, either choice had the trap of being a same-sex relationship. When I realized that and lifted my head, Touko-san was holding in a laugh as if she found the whole matter amusing.

"That's unfair, Azaka. Isn't this the famous question where it's 'True and false at the same time'!?"

"Yes, you're right. It's the famous Epimenides Paradox."

"True, to Kokutou it's a source of a devastating paradox. You guys really don't let things get boring for me. Is the Kokutou family all like this, Azaka?"

In stark contrast to Touko-san who was still laughing, Azaka was looking this way with an earnest expression on her face... So that was it. This girl was worrying about me in her own fashion. In that case, since Shiki herself wasn't clear on the subject, I at least had to clearly state my opinion on the subject.

"... Yeah, I think I understand what you're trying to say, Azaka. It's just that I don't particularly mind which way Shiki leans. Even if you were to say that Shiki was SHIKI, I don't think I would feel any different."

When I had said that, while scratching my cheek to hide my embarrassment, Azaka got angry and jumped up from her seat.

"So are you saying it's okay even if you were going out with SHIKI?"

"... Um. Yeah, probably."

Suddenly, something bulky slammed into my face.

"That's too filthy!"

Stomp stomp, stomp, it was the sound of someone running out.

By the time I thought "Ah, that book Azaka was reading until just now was what came flying," I was alone in the office with Touko-san.

Shiki had left after getting angry with Azaka, and Azaka had just run out. As for me, I was glaring at Touko-san, who was still laughing as I gingerly felt my aching face.

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And so, two hours had passed and the time had come to go home.

Neither Shiki nor Azaka came back, so I thought about dropping by Shiki's apartment while I was brewing coffee. Doing so had become a ritual before leaving work.

"Oh, that's right. Sorry Kokutou, but I need you to do some extra work for me."

Those kind of worries disappeared at the one statement Touko-san threw my way as we drank the coffee.

"Extra work? Did you take up some new task?"

"No, it's not something related to that side. It isn't anything that will earn money. I went out this morning for something, you see, and I heard an interesting story from a detective that I'm friends with. Kokutou, do you know about Kayamihama's Ogawa Apartment Complex?"

"By Kayamihama, you must mean that apartment complex that they built on the reclaimed land. The one they say is a futuristic model or something."

"Yes, that one. Was it thirty minutes by subway from here? It's a neighborhood that uses land in a posh manner that's unthinkable to us living here in the city. Well, you see, back when they were developing that place, there was one apartment complex that I briefly checked out. It seems that there was an uncanny incident there.

"At about ten o'clock last night, an office worker in her twenties got mugged in the street. The victim was a woman, so it was probably a rape attempt. Unfortunately, the victim got stabbed with a knife. The criminal fled down the street, but the victim couldn't move very well. The victim, who was stabbed in the abdomen didn't even have a cell phone. The crime scene was the apartment complex, too. Which meant there wasn't any reason to expect there to be any shops nearby, and if it's ten at night there were hardly any people going by. So as she bled out, she went into the nearest apartment complex to ask for help.

"But that apartment building's first and second floors weren't in use. They say that it's only from the third floor up that the apartment complex is inhabited. By the time the woman got to the third floor using the elevator, she knew her body had reached its limit. She screamed for someone to help her from that location for about ten minutes, but none of the apartment residents heard her, and at eleven at night she died."

... It was a tragic story.

These days, as apartment buildings got larger and larger, there was increasingly less contact between neighbors. Or rather, it seemed that there was an unspoken rule in the city now that ignoring others was polite.

I remembered hearing a story similar to the one just now from a friend of mine. There was one night that screams could be heard from an apartment a floor below him, but not one person went to help. When morning had come they found that the child of that family had been killed by the parents. Apparently the other apartment residents had heard but ignored it, thinking that it was someone playing around.

"The problem starts from there. They say that the victim's cries for help could be heard even from the apartment complex next door. Not screams, but the sound of a human asking for help. The people in the apartment complex next door said that they ignored it, thinking that since it was so loud, the people in the apartment complex would obviously run over to see what was wrong."

"What? Are you saying that the people in that apartment complex didn't know?"

"Yeah, that's what they're saying. Without exception, they are all saying that it was a quiet night, as usual. Well, if that was all, there wouldn't be anything too strange about it, but previously in that mansion there was one more case just like this one. I didn't hear many details, but that detective came asking for advice since there's something suspicious about something so weird happening twice."

"... So, you are telling me to investigate the place, Chief?"

"No, let's go to the actual location together. Kokutou, what you can do is find a real estate agent and get a list of residents so that you can quickly investigate where they all lived previously. Seeing as it's not something you can earn any money from, you can take your time. The deadline is December."

Replying that "I understood," I put my cup of coffee to my lips.

... For some reason, I got the feeling that I was stepping into another weird situation.

"But the way, Kokutou."

"Yes?"

"Are you really fine if Shiki was a boy?"

... If I was talking to Gakuto right now, I would have sprayed out the coffee I was holding in mouth without hesitation.

"... Probably not. I do like Shiki, but if I were to be greedy, I prefer her as a girl."

"Eh, what is that? So boring. In that case, there's no problem."

"What a disappointment," Touko-san shrugged, and lifted the cup of coffee to her mouth.

... There's, no, problem?

"Wait a minute. What do you mean by 'there's no problem'? That's something that–"

"–Yeah. Shiki's definitely a girl mentally too. There's no way she wouldn't be a girl when the yang-aligned SHIKI's already disappeared."

That was, but in that case, what was with that manner of speech of hers? Didn't the Shiki from before use a girl's way of talking?

"Look here, the one that took the male as being the yang side and the female as the yin side in the first place is Shiki, wasn't it? In that case, the story's simple. The idea of yin and yang comes from the Taji. You're familiar with South Korea's national flag? Aren't you? It's similar to the Tomoe crest."

The Tomoe crest... She might have been talking about that picture where you take a circle and divide it into two with a wavy line in the middle. That wasn't a simple crescent shape, but a twisted half-circle that looked as if two souls were trying to grab each other's tails. If we were to describe it as a letter, the Japanese character "の" is close to that nuance.

"If you talk about the Taiji, one half is white, the other half black. And whichever side you look at, there is a small hole of the other color punched into it. A black spot in the white whorl, a white spot in the black whorl. You understand right? The black side is the yin; in other words, the woman. This picture is one of halves that are intertwined yet incompatible, a black and white spiral."

"A mutually opposing... spiral?"

Those words, I had heard them before.

"Yeah. It would also be okay to call it yin-yang, light and darkness, right and wrong. It refers to a state where something derived from one original object has been split into two. This, in yin and yang terms, is sometimes known as Ryougi."

"Ryougi, as in..."

"Correct, Shiki's family name. Her dual personality, it was something decided in the distant past. Did she obtain a dual personality because she was a member of the Ryougi family, or was it that they knew a Shiki would be born sometime and took the name Ryougi? It's probably the latter.

"The Ryougi family is a dynasty, just like the Asagami and the Fujou families. They are families who are trying to create humans who are beyond human, and used various methods to ensure the birth of an heir. All so that they could pass on their family's 'inheritance'.

"The Ryougi family is especially interesting. They knew that if they had a supernatural ability, they would one day be destroyed by the civilized world. So they thought up a supernatural ability that would let them appear as normal human beings. Hey, Kokutou. Those people we call professionals, why is it that they can only reach the top in one area?"

Having been caught off guard by the sudden question, I was unable to give her an answer.

Today was a very long day, and the information coming into my head was exceeding my limits. On top of which, to think that Ryougi was born into such a family, just why?

"That's because no matter how perfect a body, or how high the amount of natural aptitude you are born with, you can only put one talent into one person. The higher you climb, the more you are restricted as to what other peaks you can go up, until in the end you cannot climb any others.

"The Ryougi family solved that problem by imbuing one body with a countless number of personalities. It's the same as a computer. If you put hundreds upon hundreds of pieces of software into one piece of hardware called Shiki, a professional in all areas is created. That's why her name is Shiki. The Shiki kanji in Shikigami. The Shiki kanji when you talk about Mathematical Formulas. A program that fulfills any task required of it perfectly. An empty doll that possesses countless numbers of identities, and can be modified by putting in another personality with different morals, thought patterns, even senses."

Did Shiki already know of this..? Yeah, she definitely knew. That's why she had stubbornly avoided becoming friendlier. Accepting the fact that she wasn't an average person, the fact that she had not been born into a normal family, she had just been trying to live a quiet life.

"This is a continuation on the subject of the Taiji, but the division of the chaotic「 」into two is Ryougi. In order to further stabilize this, and in order to increase the number of classes available, they divide it into four phenomena. They then further increase the complexity by cutting it into eight trigrams. Like this, they keep dividing by a base of two. This, too, could symbolize Shiki's ability. But that no longer exists. A bug appeared in the perfect program, you see. The Shiki you see now, well, there may be slight problems, but she is a perfectly normal human with self-awareness."

Click. The lighter's flame sprung up.

At Touko-san's words I was going "Eh?" And asking a question again.

"Why are you making a face like that? The one that broke it was you. A mentally disturbed person, you see, doesn't break down because they don't even dream that they may be mentally disturbed. Shiki was like that before, too. Yeah, but a human called Kokutou Mikiya made her aware of the fact. That the existence of the one called Ryougi Shiki was strange. Ah, that's right. If you were to say it was a rescue, you already saved Shiki two years ago, didn't you?"

"Here," said Touko-san and she pushed a cigarette at me. I didn't smoke, but I accepted it and lit it up.

... The first cigarette of my whole life, it had a very indistinct taste.

"Ugh, the point of the conversation got twisted. And I didn't really feel like talking about Ryougi, either. Recently it seems like I keep feeling rushed. My lips are getting loose without me even realizing it. Who knows? You might happen to die tomorrow, Kokutou."

"That's a little scary coming from you. I'll be watching out for cars, then."

"Yeah, that might be good. Anyway, about that Taiji. I told you how each side in it has a spot, right? The black in the white, the white in the black. They call this the yin in the yang, and the yang in the yin.

"In short, this is referring to those parts in a male that are feminine and those parts in a woman that are masculine. Saying that someone is yang-aligned just because they use a man's manner of speech is a rash judgment. No matter who it is, every human has some traits of the other sex. Men who like to dress up as women are a prominent example. There's no doubt in my mind that the Shiki right now is the yin-aligned Shiki. The reason she uses a masculine manner of speech is unconscious compensatory behavior on her part for the dead SHIKI. Maybe because she wants for you at least to remember SHIKI. Honestly, isn't it so cute of her?"

"———"

... Ah, now that it was spelled out for me I understood. Shiki may talk like a guy now, but she never acted like a guy like she did two years ago. No matter how you looked at it, her movements and actions were those of a girl.

Having lost the half of her called SHIKI, she was still in a very weak and vulnerable state. Realizing that, I felt like my heart was being squeezed. The Shiki that came out of her sleep of two years was more stable than before, so I had been thinking she was okay. But Shiki was still lonely, no different from back then when it seemed like she could be hurt at any moment.

I haven't changed either. Even today, I felt that I couldn't leave Shiki alone like that.

... That's right. Although I couldn't do anything two years ago.

If something were to happen again, then this time at least I must save her.

/7 (Spiral Paradox, 3)

When I had opened my eyes the next morning, it was getting past nine. I was totally late.

When I arrived at the office holding a bundle too heavy to be called luggage, Touko-san and Shiki were waiting for me.

“Sorry I’m late.”

I sighed in relief only after I leaned the shinai bag-shaped bundle against the wall. Breathing hard like I just ran a marathon, I tried to calm my breathing.

The bundle wasn’t even one meter long, but was heavy as if it were made of steel. While it didn’t seem like a very bulky bundle when I left my house, my arm had gone numb after walking a hundred meters. While I relaxed the muscles in both my arms, Shiki came walking over.

“Hey. Hey Shiki, nice weather today.”

“Yeah, they say it will be nice for a while.”

It was a bit unusual but Shiki was wearing a white kimono as if she was going out somewhere today. When put together with the red leather jacket on the sofa, it seemed like there would be a clean and clear contrast between the white and the red. Normally she doesn’t like obi, or sashes, with patterns on them. But today she was sporting an obi with a leaf-like pattern across it. Looking closer, even her kimono’s sleeves had three or so red leaves scattered across the ends.

“Mikiya, whose business is that?”

Pointing with a white finger, Shiki asked me a question. Her finger was pointed at the object leaning against the wall.

“Ah, Akitaka-san sent that. Shiki, you went out yesterday, didn’t you? When I dropped by after work you weren’t there, and Akitaka-san was waiting for you in front of the door. It had been a while since I saw him so we talked for an hour or so, but it didn’t feel like you would be coming back anytime soon and we parted ways. At the time, he entrusted me with this. He said that it may be a Kanesada, but since there’s no maker’s mark he couldn’t be sure of its origins.”

“When you say Kanesada, do you mean a Kanesada with a Kuji in it?”

Showing a rare bright face, Shiki lifted the bundle leaning against the wall. Holding the package that was heavy even for me with just one hand, Shiki began to loosen the string that held the bag shut.

Like a banana being peeled, *whoosh*, the cloth was stripped away. What was presently revealed was a long, thin metal plate. No, rather than saying it was metal it felt more like rusty iron or copper. Only the cloth from the top of the bundle had been taken off, so only a tenth of the object could be seen, but it was certain that the thing was something like a stick.

The iron inside the shinai bag was wrapped in another layer of pure cotton-like cloth. The iron was in the form of a plate that looked like someone took a ruler and made it about two times bigger, and had two small holes drilled into it. There were some kanji carved into the worn surface... Curious.

"Man, Akitaka, bringing out something like this..."

Shiki spoke as if she was troubled, but her eyes couldn't stop smiling. For some reason I couldn't express, it was depressing to see Shiki who didn't even smile at any day-to-day things, suddenly start snickering as she held that unidentifiable metal plate.

"Shiki, what is that?"

Shiki was acting too strange, so I asked her about it. When I did, Shiki spun around to face me and gave me a huge grin.

"Want to see? This is a rare piece of work you can't typically see these days."

Shiki happily started to bring the contents of the shinai bag out when Touko-san, who had been watching silently until now, stopped her.

"Shiki, I see that is an ancient katana you have there. You can't take out something like a five hundred-year-old katana in here. What will you do if the Bounded Field gets cut apart?"

Hearing that, Shiki froze. Touko-san said it was a katana. But was that blunt metal plate, that looked like an enlarged iron ruler that couldn't cut anything, really a katana..?

"On top of that there's even a Kuji on it. Is it 'May those who preside over all warriors be my vanguard'? I'm sorry, but my Bounded Fields can't stand up to a famous five hundred-year-old katana. If you take that out here, all the things in the lower floors will come tumbling down."

Taken back by Touko-san's unusually threatening words, Shiki had begun to pack the shinai bag away again... I think it was certain that these two had talked about a lot of strange and wonderful topics while I was away.

"You're right, showing Mikiya a Japanese sword with only the blade will be boring anyway. To think that he didn't prepare a hilt. Is Akitaka getting to be an old dotard too?"

Shiki mumbled absently.

... Calling Akitaka-san, who had raised her since she was ten years old, an old dotard was a bit harsh. Moreover, Akitaka-san was still in his early thirties, which meant his usefulness was still maturing. Reluctantly, Shiki lay the bundle on the sofa.

... This was something I had found out later, but back in those days a hilt didn't come attached to a katana. Japanese swords like those you see in historic dramas already have their hilts attached, but bare katanas had no decorations like some cutter blade. Apparently those two holes punched into the bottom were so that you could put a hilt on. By the way, "old swords" here refers to katanas from the middle of the Heian era to the Keichou era, without doubt an important cultural fact.

"Do you know, Shiki? Just by building up a history, a weapon becomes a mystical thing that can stand up to Magecraft. From now on, don't bring anything like that into this building even by accident. I won't take the blame for what happens if you do."

Handling a precious item, that could even become a national treasure, like that, Touko-san sighed in relief.

"By the way, Kokutou. What's the reason for you coming in late this morning?"

"I apologize, it's just that investigating proved a bit difficult. Anyway I've managed to get the names and collect some general information on the residents of the Ogawa Apartment Complex."

That's right, I started investigating the apartment building in question last night, and when I woke up the day had already passed me by.

Lately, the spread of the internet had meant that it became possible to carry out investigations even during the night. Distinctions such as "resting at night since everyone else is sleeping" have disappeared. As a result; I heard the story from Daisuke-niisan, collected some random facts here and there while web surfing, sorted what I found, and before I knew it the job had expanded to the state that it was currently in.

"... I told you that you had until December to do it. You sure like to buy the hardships you go through, Kokutou. Well, let's hear it then."

"Yes ma'am. The Ogawa Apartment Complex is a high-class building even for the posh apartment complexes in Kayamihama. It has a unique design too, so please have a look later. The construction period was from ninety-six to ninety-seven, with the work being done by three companies. You took care of the eastern tower lobbies, Touko-san. For now, I've put the names of those involved in the construction on the list. There's a detailed construction schedule attached too, so have a look."

I took out the freshly-printed resources and had spread them out on Touko-san's desk. For some reason Touko-san was blinking a lot and sat there quietly.

"As you can see, what we are referring to as the apartment complex is actually two apartment complexes right next to each other.

"Built in a nice half-moon shape there are two ten-story towers facing each other. If you look at an aerial photo, it's enough to surprise you. They really are forming a circle. Originally, they built it thinking of a company dormitory, so the first and second floors are set out as recreational facilities, but they aren't currently in use. I suppose that you can't waste power on such frivolous things with the economy as bad as it is.

"Each tower is ten stories high, with five rooms per floor. Between the east and west towers, there are ten rooms altogether. Every room is a 3LDK that mixes western and Japanese

styles. The layout of the waterworks was somewhat complex, so in about ten years' time the lower floors might start developing some leaks. As for parking, there are forty spaces in front of the apartment complex, and forty spaces underground. Compared to the number of residents it's a bit lacking, but for now there's enough with just the parking space out front.

"When the company that originally intended to use it as a company dormitory started having trouble, there was a change of ownership. Apparently, the new owner's policies meant that the building was opened to private use. The residents entered in ninety-eight, in other words; this year. They said that they had advertised for three months, but only about half the apartments were filled. There were even some rumors going around that they were going to rebuild the western tower in the near future. Oh, and here's a copy of the blueprints."

Saying that, I put the next resource on the desk. Touko-san made a disgruntled face, and furrowed her brow.

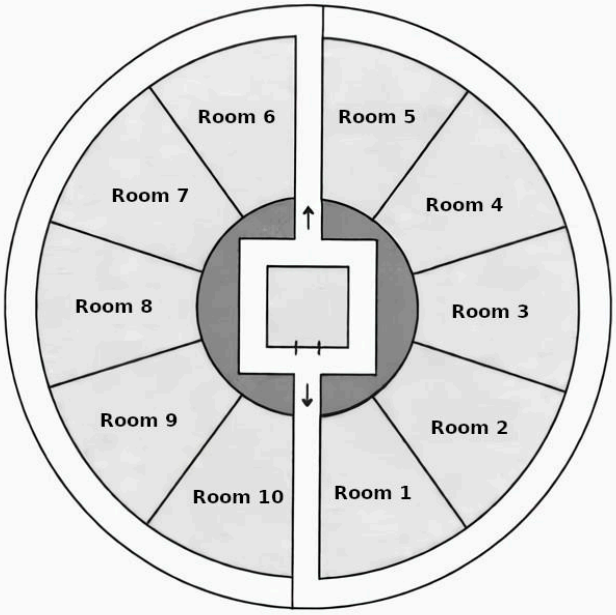
"The apartment is divided into a western tower and an eastern tower, but the first floor lobby is shared. There is only one elevator as well. For a project using this much land, the construction was actually pretty shabby. They probably focused more on outside opinion than utility when they were planning the building. The elevator alone was fraught with breakdowns at the beginning. In fact, the caretaker confessed to me that they couldn't even use the elevator until May.

"The room count is five rooms per tower; going counterclockwise from the six o'clock position, they are numbered one, two, and so on. The eastern tower is numbered from one to five. Numbers six to ten are in the western tower. The roof is a no-access area.

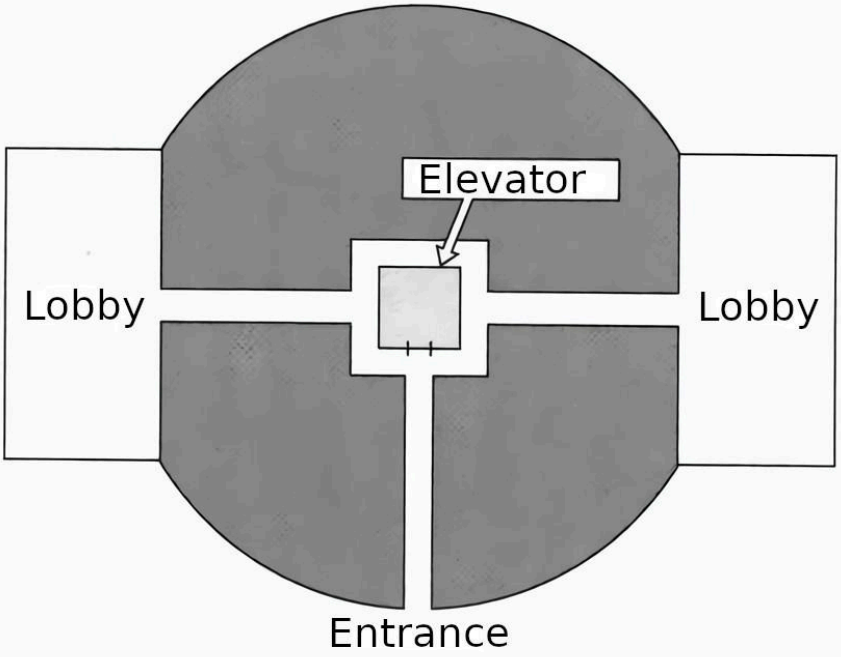
"The third floor residents are: Sonoda, empty room, Watanabe, empty room, Itsuki, Takemoto, empty room, Haido, empty room, Toenchi.

"The fourth floor residents are: empty room, empty room, Sasatani, Mochitsuki, Aratani, empty room, empty room, Tsujinomiya, Kamiyama, Enjou.

Ogawa Apartment Complex Floor Plan



3 F ～ 10 F (All Floors)



1 F ～ 2 F

Showing me the back of the leather jacket, Shiki just turned her face towards me. Her eyes were full of naive questioning, as if she had been warned about some prank she didn't remember and thought it weird.

"What is it, Mikiya? Does it seem like I've lost myself to some bad thing or something?"

Really, what was I supposed to say to her when she was so carefree? It was as if she was just popping out to do some shopping, I couldn't figure out what I had to say.

"No... It's nothing. I'll come over tonight, so let's leave talking until later."

"What? What a weirdo. But, okay. Tonight, you said? If it's at that time, I should be in my room."

"Okay then," she said, and Shiki left, holding one hand up in farewell.

◇

Around an hour after Shiki left on Touko-san's motorcycle that she had borrowed, Touko-san and I decided to go and check out the Ogawa Apartment Complex for ourselves. We drove away from the city center in Touko-san's treasured mini-coupe-like Minor 1000, or something similar, for just under thirty minutes. We soon came to an immaculately maintained port-side district.

At any rate, that place called Kayamihama was certainly wide. Whether it was because they had land to spare or not, only a few multi-story buildings dotted the landscape, and so it brought to mind the field in a polygon game that had been popular ages ago.

The apartment complex in question was really in the middle of a cluster of apartment complexes. Surrounded by buildings that all looked the same, the circular tower was visible from miles away but took a while to get to. Whereas most of the other buildings were like square tofu blocks, that round apartment building alone broke the rule as it stood there.

For a ten-story building, it was pretty high. The apartment complex was entirely circular in design, with a wall made of stacked concrete blocks enclosing the property. The lone path from the grounds to the apartment complex was almost like the road leading to the Taj Mahal, stretching straight to the apartment's lobby.

"What's this? There isn't even an underground parking lot."

Muttering in the driver's seat, Touko-san parked the car on the roadside.

"Well, shall we?"

Lighting up another cigarette, Touko-san started walking. Sticking close to her, I had just stepped onto the apartment complex's grounds when a sudden dizziness struck me. It may be because the sun was stronger today. Since I was staring up at a apartment building that shot up like a tall tower, getting briefly dizzy wasn't so unreasonable.

Pursuing Touko-san, who was striding off ahead of me, I entered the apartment.

At that moment, I felt like vomiting.

The walls of the apartment's lobby were united in a cream color and were spotlessly clean. Yet I felt so unnerved looking at it that I thought I would faint if I stopped clenching my teeth.

No, this was already close to disgust.

My insides were twisting around so much that I thought I would go crazy.

Although the air outside was so cold, the air inside the apartment building was lukewarm. It was probably only due to the internal heating being set too high, but it was like I was feeling somebody's steaming breath. The tepid atmosphere that wrapped around my skin, it was somewhat similar to being inside a living thing's womb.

"Kokutou, that's only because you're thinking of it that way."

Hearing Touko-san's voice whispering by my ear barely managed to bring me out of that weird mood. Steadying my mind, I looked at my surroundings.

The lobby was the one space that connected the two towers.

This apartment building looked as if someone took a circle and cut it in half before arranging the two halves to face each other. The two towers were connected only by the space in the center, and from the third floor onward it was impossible to go directly from the east tower to the west tower. You absolutely had to go back to the central space and go across the lobby on that floor.

There was no caretaker's office in the lobby. In the center of that circular space was a huge column that could be called the building's spine. This was the elevator that could move anywhere between the first and tenth floors. Next to the column, there appeared to be something like a staircase. It felt as though the elevator and stairs had been enclosed by walls to form a single column, it was quite gloomy.

"This, is a very unpleasant building."

"It feels like a haunted house. There's a lot of bad energy floating about which can't be hidden. But on the whole, there are quite a few buildings like this one. It's actually quite simple to make a building that drives people mad, you see. Just by changing the wall color, or the location of the stairs, you can change somebody's condition for the worse. If it's a resident who lives here every day, the effect would be much worse."

Touko-san had gotten on the elevator first.

"Which floor would be good, Kokutou?"

"Ah, any floor's good... Although if I had to choose, I would say the fourth floor."

"Then let's go to the fourth floor." Touko-san said this as she slowly looked around the inside of the elevator.

The elevator was of a strange design that looked like a twisted white cylinder. I pressed the button for the fourth floor of the buttons numbered from B to 10.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm.

There was an awful and unnaturally loud noise as the elevator started moving.

We were definitely going up, but it felt like my body was sinking into the depths of the earth.

Eventually the elevator doors opened. The fourth floor lobby was a circle too. When we came out of the elevator, the corridor leading to the west tower was in front of our eyes. The apartment complex's entrance faced north, so it meant that there was a corridor in the twelve o'clock direction.

This corridor went all the way to the outside, so that when you get to the wall on the other end, it turned around in the nine o'clock direction and went around the wall of the west tower. As expected, the doorways to all the rooms were on the outer side.

"Let's see, we're on the fourth floor right now, so that would be number 406. Then it goes to number 410, before we come to a dead end. How do we get to the east tower?"

"You have to go around the back of the elevator. The northern corridor you see when you get out of the elevator leads to the west tower, and the southern corridor, which is behind the elevator, is connected to the east tower. This apartment complex really is divided into two."

"They sure built it strangely. If they connected the outer corridors, it wouldn't be like that."

"That would be boring. They went this far with the design, so they had to at least divide black and white properly. Anyway, Kokutou. Did you have something to do on the fourth floor? Are you going to visit that place where the family was dead or something?"

When Touko-san said that, I jumped in surprise.

Touko-san's voice echoed through the cream-colored lobby. The light shined off the well-polished floor of the lobby, making me think that it was nighttime.

Yes, why hadn't I realized..? Since we got to this apartment complex, we haven't met one person. No, never mind meeting people, there wasn't even the sense that there were people living here.

"Chief, where did you hear that story?"

"From a detective I'm on friendly terms with. You're talking about that story where the thief went to rob an empty house and found the whole family dead, aren't you? I didn't hear the room number or name of the family, but I thought that if it was you, you would have investigated those."

Ah, was right. My phone call to Daisuke-niisan last night was to confirm that too.

"What should we do? Do you want to check it, Kokutou?"

"I was planning to, but now..."

To be honest I was scared. Until I had gotten here, I thought that it was an interesting but not very special story, but seeing this place made me realize that it was real. Just being here was making me tremble. Embarrassingly, visiting the house of the family involved was a scary thought even during the daytime.

"Let's go. I want to use the elevator by myself. That's right, let's meet upstairs. Come up those stairs over there. It's probably a spiraling stairway, but it might be a good idea to close your eyes."

Then, saying that, Touko-san got on the elevator again and went to the upper floors. The display showed the elevator's climb to the tenth floor.

While I was staring blankly at that, I realized only then that I was now alone.

In the lobby there was only me.

I was in a world where the only sound was my own breathing. A huge, closed room where it was impossible to tell if it was day or night. There was a heavy and stuffy oppressiveness, as if the whole room had been vacuum packed.

I never knew... That an apartment complex could be such an alien world cut off from the outside world.

"Dammit, she would never come down to me would she? That Touko-san."

By talking to myself, I had tried to regain my vitality, but it had the opposite effect. The echoes of my voice returned to me, coming to my ears as the voice of another... Even a cemetery at night wouldn't be as scary as this place was.

Whatever. As long as I was in the lobby, the pressure of being in a closed room loomed over me. I prepared myself and decided to head to room 405. Coming outside, there wasn't such a heavy feeling to the atmosphere as in the lobby. The view in the corridor that went around the outside was actually quite boring. Everywhere you looked, it was just more of the same apartment complexes.

Looking at that from the corner of my eye, I walked towards the end of the corridor. Walking to the end of the east tower, I had arrived at the fifth residence on the fourth floor.

Nine days ago. The robber that had sneaked into this room discovered several corpses and fled. After the terrified thief went to report the finding to the police, he was even more shocked to come face to face with the family going about their daily routine when he returned.

Had the thief seen some kind of hallucination? Or was there some kind of mistake?

It would have been fine to stop there, but I rang the doorbell by dredging up all that remained of the enthusiasm that had brought me this far.

Ding-dong, came the clear tone.

A little later, with a creaking noise, the apartment complex room's door had opened.

The darkness that was inside the room spilled out.

Something came out of there.

First, a person's arm.

Then, a head.

"Eh, this is Enjou, but... Who are you?"

Opening the door, that's what the rough-faced middle-aged man said to me, as if he were annoyed.

◇

In the end, that story was just another stupid wild tale.

There wasn't much wrong with the Enjou family of the number five residence who were supposed to have been involved in the incident.

When I came back to the lobby, the elevator was still up on the tenth floor. I could press the button would make it come down, but Touko-san was inside that thing. It went without saying that she would disparage me for being too scared to use the stairs.

With no other options, I directed my feet toward the nearby stairway.

The lobby still felt full of heavy air, but the normal state of the Enjou family had given me back some sense of peace. I started climbing the dark staircase lit only by a spinning red light located somewhere I couldn't see.

The stairs turned in right angles, winding around the elevator shaft entwined as they stretched up and up. As Touko-san had said, it was a spiraling stairway. Every time you reached a floor, there was a gaping wide hole in the stairwell so that you could go out into the lobby.

... The cream-colored walls were lit by the red light shining on them, I thought it looked like the stairway of some medieval castle. Something about the red light made me think of a flickering torch. The light was dim, and it couldn't reach to the end of the stairs, so every time I went up one step it made me a little more melancholic.

At the end of the twisting stairs, fighting the scary illusion that there was something standing on the other side of the wall at the end of the winding staircase, I made it to the top, and ended up on the fifth floor lobby... No, maybe it would be more accurate to say that I had escaped?

The fifth floor lobby was laid out in the same manner as the fourth floor lobby. It was an apartment complex, so it was expected that there would be no great differences between floors. Even with that said, though, this place was so similar that it was chilling.

"So you came. Let's go down, then."

Touko-san was waiting for me in the lobby.

I followed her onto the elevator without another word. When we got into the elevator, Touko-san stood in front of the panel with all the buttons corresponding to each floor, and she spoke without turning.

"Kokutou, look down at the floor. It's a quiz."

"Eh? All I have to do is look down?"

The elevator doors then shut. Again there was a loud mechanical noise. The time taken to go down was not more than three seconds. Inside the huge sealed enclosure called an apartment complex the small sealed box stopped.

"Now, here's the question. What floor is this?"

I looked up when I was told. The elevator was open and I could see the lobby. On the wall that looked identical to the one just before, there was a small plastic plate with the number five on it embedded in the wall.

"Huh... We are still on the fifth floor."

But, the elevator had definitely moved. In that case, the one that was wrong was me. After thinking about it for a moment, I came to the obvious conclusion.

"In that case, it was the sixth floor we were on just before, wasn't it?"

"Correct. Kokutou intended to go up one floor, but ended up coming up two. It's a stairway design that makes it easy to make such mistakes, but that's just a bonus. But you know, these things called apartment complexes are strange, aren't they? The fact that the only way you can tell the floor you live on is those small numbers on the lobby walls. The higher up you live, the more your senses get dulled within the elevator. If you were to work on the elevator switch so that all the floor numbers were changed, someone who wasn't used to it wouldn't be able to tell if they were on the fourth floor or the fifth. When I have the opportunity, it might be nice to experiment in a nearby apartment building. Would midnight be best? I feel excited all of the sudden."

Saying those things, Touko-san closed the elevator doors.

Before I knew it, we were on the first floor, and we came out into the lobby.

"Right. Shall we go over to the east tower? No matter which tower you're in the first floor should have a lobby, right?"

"Yeah. The place is set out so that it connects directly to the second floor facilities and has an atrium structure. Kinda like a lobby in some decent size hotel... Uh, Touko-san, weren't you the one who designed the east tower's lobby?"

"I suppose." Touko-san replied vaguely as she walked away.

The first floor lobby could be regarded as the circle's center. Stretching out from this center like some thin line were the east and west corridors, which led to each tower's first floor lobby. You could almost say that the lobbies of each tower were close to lounges.

We shortly arrived at the east tower lobby. In that quite wide space was an empty plaza. The place was open to the second floor, and a long staircase stretched straight up to the second floor atrium.

Should I say that it felt like the lounge of one of those Western villas that you often see in movies? In the middle of the semicircle lounge was a clumsy staircase. The surroundings were just more of the cream-colored walls, and the floor was made up of marble-like stone.

"If you were to set something up, let's see, would it be about here? Just in case, let's make an escape route, shall we?"

And Touko-san knelt down on the stone floor, then began sweeping the floor with her hands like some academic looking for fossils.

“Uh. What the heck are you doing, Chief?”

“A precautionary measure. But you know, didn’t you realize when you used the stairs? There were signs of movement, weren’t there?”

“?”

The stairs, had moved..?

To say that the stairs inside that box-like structure moved... would mean that the entire central column moved as well. That kind of idiotic thing, how–

“It’s not the column. Just the stairs. Didn’t you see, on the corner of the walls? There were scrape marks. Ah, was that it? You were too scared to think of looking at something like that.”

Patting the floor with her hands, Touko-san said that without even turning around.

... My thoughts truly hadn’t stretched that far. No, since the stairway was so dark that the light couldn’t reach the ends, could I say that I didn’t have the leisure to think of it?

“... But it’s impossible to move the stairs. Isn’t moving that column the same as demolishing this building?”

“That’s why I said it was just the stairs. It’s like a rocket pencil, to describe it otherwise.”

“A Rocket pencil? What’s that?”

Twitch, Touko-san’s hand froze mid-motion.

And she hurried to her feet.

“You don’t know? Those pencils that have ten or so pencil leads in one case. Small missile-like things are stacked inside like pistol rounds. They are layered in rows inside the pencil, and when one pencil lead gets worn away, you take out the missile and push the end of the pencil in. Then a new missile comes out, and you can keep writing without going through the bother of sharpening your pencil... I wonder if they still sell them? Image-wise, they look kind of like when you make tokoroten.”

I couldn’t understand what Touko-san was saying.

The missile pencil she talked about wasn’t something I knew of, but that expression of hers where she compared it to tokoroten made me get it. So, did that mean they were pushing up the stairs from below, like pressing up a jelly noodle mold?

“Are you saying they lifted up the spiral stairway from below? Like a piston?”

“That’s right. They would have left about half a floor’s worth of room from the start. At the same time, as they started being able to use the elevator, they pushed it up from below. Not in order to increase the amount per floor, but in order to skew the exits of the spiral. By doing so, you reverse north and south.”

“Now, let’s go home,” Touko-san said, she and started walking again.

Returning to the central lobby, as the Chief was leaving this circular apartment building she muttered something to herself as though she was still dissatisfied.

"... Does he really not know about rocket pencils? Those things were quite a fad when I was student."

◇

As a final touch, the windshield of the car that had been parked on the curb had a red parking violation sticker stuck on it.

The road in front of the apartment complex was wide, but there was almost no traffic. On top of that, the only car parked there was Touko-san's so it must have stood out.

/8 (Spiral Paradox, 4)

That night.

After all my investigations and work were complete, I headed over to Shiki's apartment complex.

It was November ninth, a little after eight at night.

But even when the calendar had flipped over to the next day, Shiki hadn't come back.

/9 (Spiral Paradox, 5)

... Click, click, click, click.

When I woke up, I found myself in Ryougi's room. This desolate room that I hadn't set foot in since the night when I confessed to her about killing my parents.

Outside the sun was setting. That clock here still grated on my ears, it was pointing towards six o'clock.

My head hurt.

It had been nine days or so since I cut relations with Ryougi. I've been living like a homeless person on the streets, just as it had become November. Skipping meals, I had just been looking out for the news that my parents' bodies had been discovered.

Maybe it was because I had been living as the lowest grade of human, but my headache got worse day by day. Not only that but my body had started wear out. It could be because I haven't been paying much attention to my health, but every joint that could be called a joint was heavy.

"... What the hell am I doing?" I mumbled as I hugged my knees.

It had been my intention to never set foot in this place again. But right now, I wanted to hear Ryougi's voice.

Clatter clatter, my teeth were trembling. Before I had known it I was here, as if I had gotten terrified and was asking for help.

How long had I stayed in the darkness like that?

Suddenly, the world was filled with light.

"What the heck are you doing Enjou? Do you like lurking in the dark like that or something?"

So spoke the girl in the white kimono and red leather jacket. She didn't even think it strange that I was here.

Exactly the same in every respect as before; from her shoulder length black hair, to those deep black eyes, to her boyish way of speaking. Ryougi came into the room as if it were the natural thing to do.

“Even so your timing is too good, it’s perfect.”

As Ryougi mumbled something like that she put the bundle in her hands on the bed. Going straight into the unused room, she brought out a long and thin wooden box.

“Just a minute, I have to fit this on somehow.”

Ryougi unwrapped the bundle. Inside there was only a long katana.

The kimono girl opened the wooden box with practiced hands and began attaching components – what appeared to be a scabbard, a hilt, and a tsuba, which is a large oval hand guard that looks like a koban coin – to the katana.

“Eh? The habaki is too small. Why doesn’t it fit when it’s a shinogi-zukuri style? Dammit... What a nuisance, this is the only habaki I have.”

She grumbled with displeasure. Ryougi left the transformed katana, now a fully equipped, magnificent Japanese sword, on the bed and turned to face me.

“Done. You have something to say right?”

In contrast to her words Ryougi’s face was still indifferent.

I... couldn’t think of what to say or how to say it. I only knew that I had been wanting to ask someone for help.

... Nothing had changed. From the first time I met Ryougi, I didn’t even know what kind of help I wanted to receive from her.

“I don’t know. I think something’s wrong with me. I can’t have any confidence in myself.”

Ryougi didn’t say anything, and stared at me with fixed eyes. All I could do was keep talking like I had been.

“Today, I saw my mother on the street. At first I thought it was someone who resembled her. But... It was definitely my mother. I followed her you see and... It doesn’t make any sense, she returned to the apartment complex.”

Not knowing what to do with my trembling body, I kept rattling on.

–And then.

Ryougi said “Is that so?” and stood up.

“So you’re saying your parents are still alive. It didn’t get reported in the news either, so it could be so.”

“There’s no way that could be right! I definitely killed my mother. And my father was dead too. That is an absolute fact. The ones who are wrong are the ones who are still alive!”

That’s right, so how was it that they were still living as usual?

How was it that they were going home as always?

To that blood-spattered home which had become a scene out of hell, how–

"Oh, it's wrong is it? Then let's go check."

"Wha, what?"

"I'm saying, all we have to do is go to that apartment complex and check. Whether Enjou's parents are dead or alive. We would know for sure then."

As if it was all decided, Ryougi started moving again. She put a long knife in the inner pocket of her leather jacket and hid a second knife in the back of her obi. Even though she went through such grand preparations, as lightly as if she was just going out to buy a pack of cigarettes, the white kimono girl started walking.

It seemed Ryougi was prepared to go by herself at least. I didn't feel like being around her, but I couldn't let her go off by herself so I decided to tag along.

"Enjou, do you know how to ride a motorbike?"

"... As much as anyone else."

"Then, let's do that. The one I just rode back on is still here so let's take it."

Ryougi moved to the underground parking lot.

The fact that such a small apartment complex like this had an underground parking lot was amazing in itself, but the motorbike Ryougi had prepared was amazing too. A sidecar was attached to a huge Harley-level motorbike. Without hesitating Ryougi had gotten into the sidecar.

Having already abandoned myself to the flow I got on the over-sized motorbike and headed to the port-side district apartment complex I had lived in until just a month ago.

◇

Because of the unfamiliar huge motorbike it was past seven at night when we arrived at the apartment complex.

Under a sky so cold it was impossible to think of it as November, rose the circular building that seemed like it could reach the moon. This building stood out clearly from its square-like neighbors. This strange building had a peculiar structure, and was divided into an east tower and a west tower. Our house was number four of the west tower. No, the east tower never had any inhabitants. There weren't many residents so it wasn't used. From what I've heard there were a lot of people who hoped to get rooms, but the owner of the apartment complex was picky so he only filled about half of the total number... The reason my house was in such a fancy apartment complex was because my father and the owner were acquaintances.

"We're here." I said to Ryougi who was sitting in the sidecar.

Ryougi was staring at the apartment complex as if she had seen a ghost.

"What, is this?" She said simply.

I left the motorbike on the side of the road and entered the apartment complex grounds.

Surrounded by concrete block walls the grounds were about the size of a fairly big primary school. The building itself was circular so it didn't take up much space, but the size of the garden around it was staggering.

Like a slash that cut the garden in two, a paved path stretched to the apartment complex.

I entered the lobby with Ryougi who had shut herself up.

Walking into the lobby, we arrived at the huge column dominating the center of the apartment complex. Inside the column was an elevator, and beside it was a rarely used spiral staircase.

I summoned the elevator.

Click, click, click, click.

... I felt awful.

My heart was beating faster than usual, I couldn't breathe properly.

Was it only to be expected? Since we were about to go into the room where the corpses of those I had killed were laying.

The elevator arrived. I went inside it. Ryougi followed as well. The door closed.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrmmmmmmmm.

With a running noise that was quite familiar to my ears the elevator went up.

"It's twisted."

Out of nowhere, Ryougi mumbled that.

The elevator arrived at the fourth floor. Getting off the elevator I started walking through the corridor that faced us as we got off, going in a northern direction.

When I had walked out towards the outer side of the apartment complex, the path made a right-angled left turn. The corridor ran around the East tower. On the left were the individual residences, and on the right was the outside. There was a chest height steel railing so that no one fell four floors to the ground.

"That's my home at the end over there."

We walked there. The apartment complex was quiet as usual, and while you could hear people inside the rooms it was rare to meet them in the corridors. Coming to the room at the end of the corridor I stopped.

–Was I, really going inside?

My arm didn't move. My eyesight got hazy so I couldn't grab the door handle. Oh wait, before that I had to ring the doorbell.

Even if I do have the key, if I go in without ringing the doorbell my mother would get scared. There was once an incident where some debt collectors came charging into our house, after that time she would get scared whenever I came in without ringing the bell.

My finger drifted over to the bell.

Ryougi's hand stopped me.

"Don't bother with the doorbell. Let's go inside Enjou."

"What are you saying? Are you planning to just go in there as you please?"

"Who cares, it's your house originally isn't it? It would be better to avoid hitting any switches anyway. We won't be able to see what the gimmick is then. You have a key don't you? Give it here for a sec."

Ryougi received the key to our home from me then, with a *click*, she turned the key.

The door opened... Inside, there was the sound of a television.

There was someone here.

Empty of emotion, the voices of a family conversation could be heard.

The voice of my father who blamed the way we were living upon my mother and the world. My mother's voice actually was just her nodding, and silently listening.

"———"

That was without doubt the daily life of Enjou Tomoe.

Ryougi slipped inside without a sound. I too, followed in her footsteps. Past the corridor, we opened the door to the living room.

There was a cheap table and small television that didn't suit this excellent room. The dirty room was filthy because it never gets cleaned properly. The people sitting there were without a doubt my parents.

"Hey. Is Tomoe still not back? It's eight o'clock already, one whole hour since he finished work. What the hell is he doing out there? That good for nothing!"

"I wonder, who knows?"

"The reason that kid doesn't think of his parents as parents is all because you are too soft on him. Shit, he thinks he doesn't have to pay his debts, not one coin comes my way. Just who does he think feeds and shelters him, that brat!"

"I wonder, who knows?"

———What.

What, is this?

My parents were here. My father who firmly believed he was a bigshot, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, and my mother who went along with him. Two people who should definitely be dead, they were still alive and living their daily lives as if nothing had happened.

No, that wasn't the case.

These people, why weren't they looking around at us who had just come in!?

"What time do you usually come home Enjou?"

Ryougi asked from beside my ear. I replied that it was around nine.

"So one more hour. Let's wait until then."

"What? This is, just what's going on Ryougi!?"

When I got angry at her too laid back attitude, Ryougi cast me a contemptuous glare as if to say I was annoying her.

"All that's happening is that we didn't ring the doorbell or knock on the door, so they aren't meeting the guests. We didn't press the switch that lets them respond to an event outside the set pattern. So the situation to them is that there aren't guests here, Enjou's parents are just living as they normally do."

Once she finished talking, Ryougi confidently cut across the lounge to the small room beside it... That was, my room. After hesitating for a while, I turned my eyes from my parents and went to my room.

I just stood there blankly. Ryougi too was leaning against a wall and waited for the time to pass. Inside the unlit room, Ryougi and I just kept waiting.

For what? Ha, it was obvious. Something like that; what else was there but the normal return of Enjou Tomoe?

At the place where I had committed murder before, I waited for myself.

It was a strange time. Agony that felt like it lasted for an eternity and an instant. That which we call our sense of realism melted down, and the clock felt like it was turning backwards.

In the end, I came back.

I finally came back.

I already came back.

In the middle of those two conflicting emotions, Tomoe came into the room without speaking a word to his parents. The slightly curly red hair. The frail body. The delicate face that got him treated as a girl until middle school. This Tomoe who looked like he resented the world, he took one deep breath.

... It was a bit like meditating. That was my own little ritual, as if I believed that by doing that all the difficult things I had encountered that day could be erased.

That Tomoe too, didn't recognize this Tomoe.

It was if Ryougi and I had become ghosts.

Soon, Tomoe laid out his futon and went to bed.

For a long time, I was watching Enjou Tomoe with no thoughts on the matter even though I knew what would happen next.

I could hear the sounds of a fight coming from the living room. My father's voice, and the emotional voice of my mother that I was hearing for the first time.

My mother was lashing out at my father while letting out a harsh metallic screech. That sounded like a barking dog, not a human.

Or maybe it was some mysterious being from Venus... For the first time I realized that a woman's hysteria was similar to the convulsions of a drug addict. This was some ridiculous first-hand experience I was getting.

Thud, an unpleasant sound.

A rough breathing that I thought belonged to mother could be heard through the sliding door.

Click, click, click, click.

"... Stop."

Even if I murmured that, nothing changed.

Because, this was.

Click, click, click, click.

The sliding door opened. Tomoe opened his eyes. My mother stopped in the doorway with a big kitchen knife in her hands.

"Tomoe, please die."

A woman's voice, void of emotion as if something had snapped.

Click, click, click, click.

Tomoe would have been looking into the glare.

My mother, she was really.

Crying, in apparent sadness.

Cli, ck.

My mother was wildly stabbing Tomoe repeatedly. Stomach, chest, neck, arm, legs, thighs, fingers, ears, nose, eyes, and lastly the forehead as well. The kitchen knife broke there, and with the broken blade my mother cut her own throat.

–––A dull thud echoing through that room.

Click, click. Click, click.

Click, click. Click, click.

Click, cli, ck. Cli, ck, cli, ck, click.

..... Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack!

Aahh, what a–––

"–What a horrible dream."

My nightmare had become reality.

But I was fine with any explanation about how it had come to pass.

Except, it was too real, all I could do was suppress my urge to vomit.

Swoosh, the white kimono moved.

Ryougi was planning to leave the room.

“If your curiosity is satisfied let’s go. We have no more business here.”

“... No more business, what!? There are people, I, am lying dead here.”

“What are you talking about? Hey, pay attention now. There’s not one drop of blood. When morning comes around they will open their eyes. This is a「loop」where they are born in the morning and die at night. The one lying over there isn’t Enjou. After all, you’re the one still alive.”

Ryougi’s words woke me up and I looked around the terrible scene... Really, although there was such an awful event there was not one drop of blood.

“Wha, how..?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why anyone would do something like this. Anyway we are done here. Now, let’s go to the next one.”

Tap, tap, Ryougi walked out.

Unable to bear it any longer, I asked her back.

“What do you mean the next one? Where are you going now, Ryougi!?”

“Isn’t it obvious? To your real house, Enjou.”

To make it a clean break, Ryougi told me as if to drive out the ghost called confusion that had covered me.

◇

When we returned to the central lobby, Ryougi did not get on the elevator but instead went around the back of it. The back of the elevator... To the south was the corridor leading to the east tower.

The east and west towers had the same structure.

Due to the nature of this apartment complex, the people of the east tower did not go into the west tower. I had lived here for half a year, but I had only realized this obvious fact now.

We walked through the connecting corridor.

The time was past ten o’clock, and the wind was cold enough to bite the skin.

... There were few residents in the east tower. Perhaps because of this, only the minimum number of lights were on, and there were no lights from the rooms next to us.

It was the winter's darkness, where the moonlight was the only thing we could depend on.

Ryougi charged confidently along that uninhabited corridor, One, two, three, four... When she got to the last room at the end of the corridor, she stopped.

"I thought that was a bit strange, it was a small thing to tell the truth."

Suddenly, while glaring at the door Ryougi started speaking.

"You said you were in number four zero five didn't you? But Mikiya said your name last. A meticulous guy like him wouldn't have changed the order for no reason. In that case, it would be weird if the Enjou family weren't in the last room of the fourth floor, namely number four ten."

"What do you mean?"

"That elevator didn't work for a while right? It only began moving about the time the all the residents had moved in and started to get used to the apartment complex. That was the signal for everything to begin. It's all a trick to reverse north and south. The reason the elevator is circular, and has such a loud running noise, is because it's all one great disguise. That's also the reason the second floor isn't used. They would have needed at least one floor's worth of room to half-turn the people inside without them noticing."

The north and south exists, were switched..?

Was she saying there really was such a childish toy-like mechanism? But what if it really did exist?

The corridor that faced you as you got off the elevator led to the west tower. That fact was so obvious that it was unthinkable anyone who lived here would suspect it.

In that case, if you didn't notice that the elevator had turned a hundred and eighty degrees, going down the corridor that faced you when you got off the elevator was the normal thing to do.

Supposing that the elevator really had turned without you noticing it so that north had become south, then that would mean that all this time I had been heading to the east tower. The structure of this lobby's northern and southern ends were exactly the same. The corridors that lead to each tower both turned to the left at a right angle as well, so there was no way you would notice anything was wrong.

"Then, are you saying that this is my home?"

"Yeah. To be precise, the home you were in for a month after you moved in. After the elevator started working it would have been that place from before. They would have switched the number plates, and without a doubt they moved the stairs around to match the operation of the elevator too. It wouldn't make sense if they didn't reverse the staircase exits too. The stairs in this place, they're a spiral aren't they?"

Ahh, they really were. I couldn't even give her a nod.

"But that must be a lie. Anyone would notice something like this!"

I rebutted her because I didn't want to accept it all, but as expected Ryougi negated my statement while keeping up that unworried pose of hers.

"This place isn't normal. It's an alien world. The surroundings are full of square apartment complexes so there's not much difference in the view, and the inside of the apartment complex is enclosed by walls. There are suspicious patterns embedded into the cream colored walls here and there, they're putting an unconscious burden upon the retina. It's not Touko's. But this is one meticulous Bounded Field. There aren't any small abnormalities, so you can't perceive the greater abnormality."

Ryougi had put a hand upon the doorknob.

"I'm opening it. Enjou, you're coming home for the first time in half a year."

Ryougi said that as if she was happy. I, felt that we shouldn't open that door.

◇

Inside room ten, was a sticky darkness.

There was nothing but darkness.

Click, click, click.

Inside my ears I could hear a noise like that.

My, joints, were heavy.

"The light, is it this one?"

In the darkness I could hear Ryougi's voice.

Click, the lights came on.

"....." I held my breath.

But, I wasn't surprised. Since I knew this was here for a long time.

"It's been about half a year since they died huh," Ryougi's voice was steady.

It would've been about that long.

There were two human corpses in the living room that we entered.

Dirty skeletons that had a lightly attached skin-like substance. The watery, rotting flesh was laying piled on the floor, so it had become a garbage heap that you couldn't know the contents of.

Enjou Takayuki and Enjou Kaede, the corpses of my father and mother.

The corpses of the parents I had killed one month ago, all because I didn't want to see the nightmare of my murder anymore. But the corpses were from half a year ago. And then there was the Enjou family in the east tower who were still alive.

I could no longer think on the paradox those things represented.

Like Ryougi who was just standing there blankly, I was not surprised, and was looking down at the corpses with a blank mind, as if I was looking at the sand in a hourglass fall.

Compared to the scene from before, the playback of the nightmare I saw every night, a finished corpse like this was merely disgusting. There wasn't even much of a shock; human corpses that were done away with a long time ago. A pile of bones, from which it was no longer possible to distinguish who was who.

The parts that housed the eyes were now dark, cave-like holes, that stared into emptiness.

... There was no worth to this.

Dying so pointlessly, without any recompense, these people who had died like idiots were my parents.

Unable to stand the persecution from those around her, as well as being unable to deny her husband who stubbornly insisted that it wasn't his fault; after suffering repeated cycles every day, my mother was finally driven to murder my father and then herself in the end as well.

"_____"

That's all it was, but, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

What was this? What had happened to me?

I didn't need my father or my mother.

It was just that those people I so loathed were dead, so why had I become like some wooden doll?

At that moment, the sound of an opening door had come from the entrance.

"Ooh, are they saying they want to go for it?"

Ryougi spoke as if smiling and pulled a knife out from inside her jacket.

Someone slowly came into the living room.

The lightly treading shadow that appeared without having made a sound was a middle-aged man who looked like he could have belonged anywhere. His blank face and empty eyes paradoxically let us sense that he was a dangerous person.

That man who I thought I had seen somewhere tried to attack us straight away. Like some puppet being controlled by its strings; without any warning.

But Ryougi easily killed him.

One person. Two people. Three people. Four people. She killed the apartment complex's residents who were flooding in through the front door, killing them with an easy grace that made it look like she was dancing. There were no useless motions in that dance.

Before long the living room was full of corpses. Ryougi grabbed my hand and started running.

"It's not good to be in this place for long, let's go."

Ryougi was Ryougi.

I had become a little unsteady after seeing my parents' corpses, but even then I couldn't forgive this situation.

Why, why did this she kill people for no reason?

"Ryougi, you!"

"Let's talk later. By the way, those things aren't human. Even I can't tell how many times they've died. Things like those, they aren't humans or even corpses but mere dolls. This one and that one, they all want to die so I'm feeling sick."

For the first time with a face full of hatred, Ryougi ran.

I hesitated for a second, then stepped over the corpses of the crowd Ryougi had killed and came out into the corridor.

When I came out to the corridor, there were already five or so people lying on the ground. In the time that I spent looking away, Ryougi was cutting down several people in front of number eight.

———Strong.

It was overwhelming. For some reason these didn't seem like they came from the east tower, but they didn't move slowly like the zombies you see in movies. With a human-like quickness they leaped toward us.

Regardless, Ryougi didn't bat an eyelash and easily took care of them. Was the reason they weren't bleeding because, as Ryougi said, they weren't human? Ryougi looked like a white Death, killing people without spilling a drop of blood, she was opening a path to the central lobby.

I looked toward the end of the pack of people Ryougi was cutting down.

The light of a lamp leaked out from the lobby. In the lightless west tower's lobby a black shadow stood with his back to the corridor entrance from which the light was coming.

It was different from these mindless residents.

That mass that I almost mistook for a black monolith, was a man in a black coat.

The moment I saw that, my consciousness froze and I became unable to move a finger like some puppet whose strings had been cut. I shouldn't have seen him. No, that's wrong. I shouldn't have come to this place. In that case I wouldn't have met him.

I wouldn't have met that thing that fit in so well with this quiet and terrible event, that devil-like black shadow–

(/10)

The man was waiting at the end of the black corridor. He stood in a way as to block off the one narrow path to the central lobby. This man in a black coat rejected even the moonlight, appearing to my eyes as a shadow deeper than the night.

Without any emotion this dark-colored man watched as the white girl dispatched the apartment complex's residents.

She must have felt those eyes upon her, because as soon as she killed the last resident charging at her Ryougi stopped her feet.

The girl, Shiki, only became aware of this man's existence after coming this close. The distance between them was not even five meters. She herself couldn't believe that she didn't perceive an "enemy" until he had gotten so close to her.

No, that wasn't all. She couldn't feel this man's presence although she was looking right at him, that fact stole away all of the composure she had maintained till then.

"... This is an amusing turn of events. If all had gone according to plan this meeting should have come after this side was completed." Heavy, the Magus spoke with a voice that sounded like it could bring a listener to their knees.

One step, the man came forward.

Shiki didn't respond to his trivial and hugely vulnerable advance.

Although she knew that the man in front of her was an "enemy," and that he wished to kill both her and Enjou, she couldn't make herself rush in as usual.

"This bastard, I can't see it...!?"

Hiding her inner surprise, Shiki coldly looked the man over. This man didn't have the death she could see on people if she merely wished to.

If you felt along a human's body, there were lines that put an end to the part they belonged to if they were cut. Whether those were the cracks in life, or a weakness in the bonds between the molecules, Shiki didn't know. It was just that she could see them.

Without exception everyone she had seen until now had possessed those "lines of death".

But upon this man, those lines were too faint.

Shiki glared at the man more strongly, and harder than she had ever done before. Her brain may have overheated, because she observed the opponent until a portion of her consciousness went white, only then could she see it.

... In the center of his body, she could see a hole in the middle of his chest.

The line went round and round like a child's doodling, tracing a circle at the same place. The result was what looked like a hole.

"I know you, you bastard."

Shiki knew this opponent who had such an uncanny form of life.

... She remembered.

The distant memory that the Shiki of today couldn't remember up to now. It was a fragment of the events from that rain occluded night two years ago.

The man replied.

"Indeed. In fact it's been two years since we met like this." A heavy voice that almost seized the listener's brain.

The man leisurely put a hand to the temple of his head. There, on the side of his head, a straight scar that stretched left from his forehead. The deep wound Ryougi Shiki had inflicted two years ago.

"You're–"

"Araya Souren. The one who will kill Shiki."

Without moving a single eyebrow, the Magus made that declaration.

The man's coat really did look like that of a Magus. Hanging down from his shoulders, the black cloth was similar to the cape of a wizard in a fairy tale. Beneath that cape, one of the man's arms was stretched out. Slowly, as if to take hold of Shiki's distant neck.

Shiki widened the gap between her legs as she took a stance. Even the knife she had held in one hand until now was clenched in both hands.

"How vulgar. What meaning is there to this apartment complex?"

In order to control her nervousness, and maybe, the fear she was experiencing for the first time in her life, Shiki spoke up.

The Magus replied, as if to indicate that Shiki had the right to hear it.

"There's no grand reason. However you look at it, it's my personal desire."

"Then is the repetition a hobby of yours too?"

Twitch, Shiki glared at the man with eyes full of hostility.

Repetition, like that Enjou family, the paranormal phenomenon where they die at night and come back to life in the morning.

"It not effective but. I have created a world that concludes within a single day. However it can't become a Ryougi – the Two Forms – just because life and death are next to each

other. If it isn't the life and death of the same people, it is insufficient as a place to enshrine you. It's incomplete as a spiral where you come to life after you die. If the condition is for them to be incompatible while mixing with each other, there's no solution but to connect the two. Therefore, in the Yin I prepared their corpses, and in the Yang I prepared their daily lives."

"Ha, then this side is the corpse storage, and that side is their daily life? You are sure taking a lot of care with useless things, there's no meaning to something like that."

"I believe I already said that there was no meaning."

And then the man spotted the youth standing like a block of wood behind Shiki. Enjou Tomoe was still frozen after hearing the name Araya Souren.

"Yes, nothing like a reason exists. Even from the beginning it's impossible for a human to exist with two attributes at once. The dead and the living can't exist together. In this paradoxical world there is no meaning that an individual can grasp."

The Magus returned his gaze from the boy back to the girl. As if he was saying that someone like Enjou Tomoe had no meaning.

"This is just an experiment. I wanted to find out if a human could indeed meet an end other than their own. A human must die. But for every human there is only a foreordained death. The death that one person meets, of that there is only one kind. One who dies in a fire will die by fire no matter what form their death takes, and one who is murdered by their family is murdered by their family no matter how hard they struggle. Even if they confront the first death and escape from it, the second, and the third death will come only through the foreordained method.

"This limited death, we call it our lifespan. A human has even his way of dying decided for him. However if you were to repeat the same end a couple of thousand times, even that spiral would develop errors. It doesn't matter if the error is a trivial one. Just being unlucky enough to be hit by a car on the way home from work is sufficient. But, as of now the results have been the same. It appears that one's destiny does not change with only around two hundred repetitions."

The man spoke dispassionately, as if the matter was insignificant. With just that, Shiki intuitively felt that she had to kill this man here and now. She didn't know by what method, or what process the man was using to do this sort of thing.

All she knew, the one certain thing, was that the man was making Enjou Tomoe's family kill each other every day, for an experiment that he himself didn't care about.

"To make them die the same way... You're making them repeat their final day over and over again? By preparing a morning that begins with the same conditions and a family that lives under the same conditions? So is the only family that dies at night the Enjou family?"

"If that was the case there wouldn't be any meaning to this alien world. All the families who were called to this place had already broken. Relationships that are already mangled easily arrive at their final destination if you just remove some personal space. A road to an end that takes decades is nothing but self-mortification. These people merely reached the end they would eventually have reached in less than one month."

... The Magus spoke neither with pride nor lament.

Shiki narrowed her black eyes and peered at the black man.

"... In the end you are saying that you broke the brakes and egged them on. Without a doubt, this building has stress piled inside it. Everywhere you go it's warped. The floor is slanted everywhere like some ocean so you lose your sense of balance, and because of the use of lighting and paints that put a burden on the eyes you become tired without even noticing it. To make people so crazy without even using any magical effects, you are a very good architect, I'll give you that."

"I commissioned the design of this place from Aozaki. If you wish to congratulate someone you should congratulate her."

The man had come one step closer.

It seemed that the time for talk was over.

Shiki decided to aim for the man's neck, and lastly asked the question that had really been on her mind.

"Araya. Why are you trying to kill me?"

The man didn't respond. Instead, he said something strange.

"Neither Fujou Kirie nor Asagami Fujino were effective."

"Huh?"

Shiki swallowed her words upon hearing those unexpected names. Piercing that opening, the man stepped forward one more step.

"Unable to live without being close to death, Fujou Kirie was someone similar yet different to you."

... Fujou Kirie who had been confined to a bed with a disease that meant she could die at any moment. A woman who had only been able to feel that she was alive through death. A human who had only been able to feel that they were alive through death... A person who possessed abilities with one mind and two bodies.

And.

Ryougi Shiki, who could only realize the fact she was alive by approaching death and defying it... A person who possessed abilities with two minds and one body.

"Then there was Asagami Fujino who could only find joy by coming into contact with death, again someone similar yet different to you."

... Asagami Fujino, she who had no sense of pain and so could not accept feelings from the outside world. A girl who could only find pleasure in the extreme act of killing a person. A human who could only feel that they were alive by observing the pain her victims went

through as she killed them, and the sense of superiority that brought... The scion of an old bloodline that sealed off the abilities they were born with through physical means.

And.

Ryougi Shiki who could only feel herself and others by coming into contact with death and trying to kill each other... The scion of an old bloodline that artificially developed their abilities.

"When death came near, she chose death and you chose life. Throwing your lives before yourselves she enjoyed killing, and you enjoyed trying to kill each other. You would have felt it. That those girls were comrades, yet murderers whose natures conflicted with Ryougi Shiki."

Shocked to the core, Shiki was watching the approaching darkness as it talked to her.

Watching was all she could do.

"I failed two years ago. That person was too different. What was needed were those who had diverged from the same 'Origin'. That's right. Be happy, Ryougi Shiki. Those two were sacrifices that I prepared for you."

The man's voice was rising like that of someone who could not hold in their laughter. But his expression didn't change. The face of a philosopher, who was full of troubles, remained unchanged.

"There's still one more piece left to play, but Aozaki has noticed so I suppose there is no helping it. Enjou Tomoe was a fortunate find. You came here by your own volition, from a place where my will had no power."

"You're––"

Shiki put strength into the two hands that were holding the knife.

The man stopped, and pointed toward the space behind her.

What was there was only the piled remains of those she dispatched.

That, overwhelming materialization of sin and darkness.

"Nothingness is your chaotic impulse and your Origin. See that darkness, and recall your name."

An order tinged with magical suggestion echoed through the corridor.

With her mind being stolen by that Shiki desperately shook her head and shouted.

"––the culprit...!"

Shouting like she was spitting that out, Shiki leaped towards the Magus. With the speed of an arrow let loose from a bow that had been drawn back to the limit, and with the speed and murderous intent of a wild beast.

◇

There was only about three meters separating the two.

Shiki and the Magus, confronted each other in that narrow corridor, there was nowhere to run. Something like retreating, neither of them are even considering the option.

Shiki's body leaped forward.

With this distance, it didn't even take a few seconds to approach the enemy. She quickly stabbed at the man's chest with the knife.

The white kimono flowed in the darkness.

Before that, the Magus spoke.

"Fugu,"

The air changed. Shiki's body suddenly stopped.

"Kongou,"

Piercing the air with one hand, the Magus shouted while facing Shiki. Shiki saw a line coming up from the floor.

"Dakatsu,"

All movement was being cut off around the Magus. Shiki saw it.

The three circular patterns stretched out from under the man in black's feet.

"My body, feels heavy...?"

The three circles that protected the Magus resembled a diagram displaying the orbital path of a star. Three thin and long circles were overlapping each other as they rose up from the floor to the air.

As soon as she stepped over the outermost line of that circle, Shiki's body had lost all of its momentum. Like a jeopardized butterfly caught a spider's web.

"Ryougi Shiki, I, Araya Souren, shall take that body."

The Magus moved.

If Shiki left an afterimage of a white kimono in the darkness of the night as she ran, the man melted into the night as he approached his prey.

A demon-like speed that didn't even let you grasp the process of him approaching. He stopped, next to the immobile Shiki the Magus's black coat flapped in the air.

Shiki was unable to respond to the Magus's unfeelable approach. She had been looking, she had been watching the man advancing towards her, but she couldn't perceive that the man was standing right next to her.

A chill ran down her spine.

Only now, she barely understood that her "enemy" was a true monster.

The Mags stretched out his left hand. He stretched out a vice-like palm, open as if to crush Shiki's face.

"Get ... Away... From me!"

The chilling feeling that beat upon her back had the effect of reviving her from her frozen state. At the moment the tips of the Magus's fingers touched her face, Shiki twisted her head as if recoiling from them. Just like that she shifted her body to the side and stabbed the Magus's arm with her knife.

Tung, the knife made a dull noise as it severed the Magus's left wrist.

", Taiten."

The Magus pronounced.

The knife blade definitely passed through the Magus's wrist, but it didn't fall from the arm. The edge passed through it cleanly as if cutting a turnip, but the Magus's hand didn't even have a wound upon it.

", Chiyougiyou"

His right hand moved. It pushed forward in anticipation of Shiki's movement after she escaped his deathless left hand, it had a solid grasp upon her.

Grabbing the girl's face with one hand, the Magus lifted Shiki's body into the air. Even if Shiki was a girl, he looked like a ghost or a monster as he lifted up a human with one arm.

"Aaahhh."

Shiki's throat was shaking. There was no awareness in that moan-like sound.

All that can be felt from this man's hand was a crushing despair. The feeling penetrated through her flesh to reach her brain, and from there it rode down her spine to invade her whole body.

For the first time in her life. She knew, that she would die here, just like this.

"Still inexperienced. I've embedded a Śarīra, a Buddha's Remains, in this left hand. There are no places where you can easily kill it, not even with Mystic Eyes of Death Perception. Araya will not be hurt by such a simple act like cutting him."

The Magus squeezed hard with the hand grasping the girl's face as he spoke.

Shiki didn't reply. The pressure on her face was so strong that she doesn't even have any energy to talk.

... This man's hand, it was a machine designed to grab a human's head and crush it. There was no way to remove the five fingers embedded in her face by force. If she was to rashly shake her body and retaliate, this machine would ruthlessly crush her head.

The Magus's continued speaking.

"Moreover, I cannot not die. My origin is 'Stillness'. Someone who has awoken to their Origin becomes ruled by that Origin itself. How can you kill someone who has already stopped?"

Shiki didn't reply. She threw away all her emotions, and bent all her energies to finding those faint lines upon the man's body. Ignoring both the paralyzing despair running throughout her body and the pain crushing her face, she tried to find that one breach.

But before she could. The Magus looked over the girl he was holding in the air, and made a decision.

"I see. That face is useless."

It was an emotionless voice. The Magus put strength into his arm for the first time.

Crackle, the sound of bone breaking could be heard.

In that instant–

The right arm that attempted to pulverize the face of the girl called Ryougi Shiki, this time it really did get cut off.

"–Mmm."

The Magus retreated a bit. Having cut off the Magus's arm at the elbow while still in that floating position, Shiki pulled off the hand clinging to her face and quickly jumped back.

Thwock. The black arm fell to the floor.

Narrowly escaping to a place untouched by the three circles around the Magus, Shiki knelt with one leg on the floor.

Whether it was because of the pain from having her face squeezed, or because she had focused her awareness to look for the Magus's faint lines of death. Shiki's breathing was ragged as she looked at the floor she was kneeling upon.

The distance between the two had widened once again.

"... Indeed, I was foolish. I should have had all the proof I needed after the events at the hospital. Whether it is dead or alive, if it moves you cut off the source of that motion. That is your ability. Even if I am a stopped organism, as long I exist like this there is a thread that permits my existence. If that is cut I would definitely die. The unique exception is this left arm, but even that can't be hidden forever. No matter which saint's bone it is as long as it functions there will always be a cause that promotes it."

Ignoring the severed arm the Magus talked on.

"As expected I don't need those eyes. As a component of Ryougi Shiki they are too dangerous. But before I destroy them, I may need to anesthetize you."

Maintaining the three fold Bounded Fields the Magus then came forward one step.

Shiki kept staring at those three circles.

"... It is unfortunate, but you should have given up just now."

Shiki said that with the knife reversed in her grip.

"I know Bounded Fields too. In Shugendou they lay out a Bounded Field to prevent women from entering holy ground. There are stories of how women who enter turn to stone, but a Bounded Field is only a boundary. The inside of the circle isn't the Bounded Field. That boundary is a magical wall that stops others. In that case, if the line disappears that power is lost."

And with that she planted her knife in the floor.

Out of the three circles the Magus possessed, she had just "killed" the outermost circle.

"Moumai."

In an anxious manner the Magus came forward.

Another step, even though he approached Shiki, there was no change in Shiki... The man's talismans had just shrunk from three to two. The Magus clicked his tongue inwardly. He hadn't considered the possibility that Shiki's Mystic Eyes of Death Perception would be so powerful. To think that she could kill a concept like a Bounded Field which had no form, or life, that kind of absolute power...

Having lost Fugu, the circumference of the triple wards that ruled over outside invaders of the boundary, the Magus started running to kill Shiki.

"There are still two left."

"Even that, is too slow."

Still in that crouched position, Shiki put her hand behind her. Inside the obi that tightened the kimono was the second knife. As soon as she pulled the knife out to the side from the obi on her back, she immediately threw it at the Magus.

The knife blade penetrated the two-fold Bounded Field.

Like a stone skimming the water, the knife bounced twice off the top of the circle, and flew toward the Magus's forehead at the speed of a bullet.

"–!?"

The Magus had nimbly evaded. It looked like the knife nicked the edge of his ear and disappeared into the corridor, but the ear which had appeared to have evaded the attack had actually been carved off. Flesh, blood, broken bone, and brain fluid leaked out of the wound.

"–Ugh."

The Magus let out a groan.

Faster than that however, he felt an impact that skewered his body.

Thud, and a white darkness landed upon the Magus's body.

By the time the Magus grasped that it was Shiki, who had charged straight at him after throwing the knife, the outcome of the fight had already been decided.

Driving into his shoulder first, Shiki's single blow had the same force as a cannon shell. Just that alone would have broken a few bones, but Shiki was clenching a silver knife in her hands.

The knife was perfectly penetrating the center of the Magus's chest.

"Ug–gh."

The Magus coughed out blood. His blood was a sand-like powder.

After Shiki removed the knife she had immediately thrust it into the Magus's neck with all the strength in her two hands. The fight had already been decided, but she was desperately trying to deliver another critical blow. Because––

"You don't know when to give up do you? You'll lose your way in the nether world due to that, Shiki"

––Her foe wasn't yet dead.

"Dammit, why...?"

Shiki shouted as if casting a spell, "Why, why don't you die?"

The Magus, still with a face that showed no emotion, laughed with just his bright eyes.

"I realize that spot is my weakness. But just that is not enough. Even if it's with Mystic Eyes of Death Perception, you cannot instantly kill this two hundred year old life of mine. This body will die one day, but I was prepared for this happening. It's quite fitting that the price I pay for capturing Ryougi is my death."

The Magus's left hand came racing in.

... The outcome of the fight had already been decided.

His tightly clenched fist drove into Shiki's stomach.

Receiving a blow that could break through a large tree, Shiki's body rose up into the air. With just that one attack Shiki spewed out just as much blood as the Magus who had his chest and neck stabbed.

With a crackling noise, her insides and the bones that were protecting them broke.

"–––"

Shiki fainted. No matter how great a physique she had, her body was still that of a young girl. Even if half the power had been held back, there was no way she could've withstood Araya's attack, which could have broken a concrete wall.

Grabbing hold of her stomach with one hand the Magus lifted the girl up, and threw her at the wall of the apartment complex. It was a brutal action that looked like it should break every bone in Shiki's body, but that too had turned into an unnatural event... Having been thrown onto the wall Shiki's body was sucked in as if she was sinking into water.

Only when the apartment complex wall had finished engulfing Shiki, did the Magus lower his arm.

... Shiki's knife was still buried in his neck and his eyes held none of the oppressive light they had shown up to now.

Although a moment of silence went by without anything happening the black coat did not budge.

That was only to be expected.

The Magus's body, was totally dead.

/8 (Spiral Paradox, 5)

Even when the date changed to November tenth, Shiki didn't come home.

Shiki had a bad habit of wandering around without locking the door to her apartment, but these days she properly locked up before going out. Because of that, I was unable to even go inside as I waited out there for hours.

... Come to think of it, Akitaka-san had been waiting outside in the same way before. However, he never got to go inside and had left after handing me a package to give to Shiki.

If Shiki went for a nighttime walk, it wasn't not uncommon for her to stay out until dawn. On a normal day this would have been nothing to worry about, but when Shiki left the office yesterday, I had felt something was off. I hung around for a long while because that stuck in my mind, but even when morning arrived, she hadn't come back.

/11 (Spiral Paradox, 6)

While I waited for Shiki who had not returned, the streets had already greeted the morning.

A depressingly cloudy sky had set the tone of the weather.

Holding an inexplicable uneasiness within my heart I headed towards work. The time was a little past eight in the morning. Touko-san was sitting at her desk but there wasn't even a shadow of anyone else, so even my last hope – that Shiki would be here was pitifully betrayed.

Saying hello as usual I sat down at my desk, getting on with the work from yesterday... No matter how gloomy the apprehension that had come over me was, my body was functioning fine. It may have been because it was a job I had repeated over and over again but, regardless of how shadowed the mind of Kokutou Mikiya himself was, the power of the daily routine was such that it made me live out a normal day.

"Kokutou, about yesterday."

From the Chief's desk in front of the window Touko-san's voice could be heard.

I replied stupidly with a "Yeah?"

"It's about the residents of the apartment complex in question. You were annoyed that you were only able to investigate thirty three of the fifty families, but that was the extent of the investigation. It wasn't that you weren't able to dig anything up, those records didn't exist in the first place. Those other twenty families, who you were only able to obtain the names and family structures of, were fake families. I looked into it afterwards, but I got the same result for the first four cases so I gave up. They had taken the family register and personal history of people who had been dead for years to fabricate residents who weren't even there."

Once again I half-heatedly replied, "Yeah."

"All the falsified families were residents in the west tower. What is going on with..."

In the middle of the sentence Touko-san frowned. She made a displeased expression as if there was a line of ants crawling over her body, then mumbled, "A trespasser." Having grabbed a ring made of grass out from inside her desk, she tossed it toward me.

"Take that and stand by the window. Don't put it on your finger. A guest will be coming soon, so thoroughly ignore him. Don't even make a sound. If you do that the guest will leave without noticing you."

Touko-san spoke with a very displeased expression. An acute tension under-laid her words, saying "don't ask anything else," so I decided to just do as she had said.

Holding tight to the haphazardly made grass ring, I stood next to the wall behind the sofa that Shiki always used.

Then, I immediately heard someone's footsteps.

There was the sound of someone's boots, theatrically ringing off the concrete floor of this building that was neglected before construction was finished, where the steel reinforcing rods were exposed. Without stopping once, that noise had come straight over to this room where the office was.

A red shadow appeared in the door-less entrance of the office.

A German-looking man who seemed to be in his early twenties with blue eyes, dark gold hair, a sharp face, and overly refined behavior. The handsome man in the red coat who looked like he had been painted by some artist raised his hand cheerfully as he came into the office.

"Hello, Aozaki! It's been a while. How are you?"

He showed a smile filled with friendliness... But to me it only looked like the malicious face of a snake.

The young man in the red coat stopped in front of Touko-san's desk.

Touko-san remained seated in her chair, and was giving him a cold glare which was frankly unwelcoming.

"Cornelius Alba. What business does the director-elect of the Sponheim Abbey have in this remote place?"

"Haha, that's obvious! I'm here to see you. Since I owed you so much from London, I came to give you some advice as an old colleague. Or do you find my kindness a nuisance to you?"

Having spread his arms out dramatically, the young man let loose a smile full of goodwill. He was the complete oppose of Touko-san, Touko-san's cold expression didn't change a bit. Even confronted with that glare, the young man was smiling broadly.

"On top of that Japan is such an good place. You say it's a remote area, but that's because the Association's surveillance is careless. This country has its own unique Magecraft System that is incompatible with our organization's. Was it called Onmyoudou, derived from from the continent? I can't tell the difference between that and Shintou, but that isn't really a problem. Their good point is that they don't act first unless you encroach upon their sovereignty. Unlike the Association, they're closed off and only act after something happens but not before. They are experts at dealing with the aftermath. That's how all Japanese people are. Oh, but I'm not saying that in a bad way, it's a good thing for me. It's

unthinkable in my country to have a plan go without any disturbances. For a Magus who is not a part of the Association, this country is a paradise."

He added with a laugh. "Of course that does not have anything to do with me since I'm a member of the Association."

He only saw Touko-san. It really seemed like he didn't see, or even notice me.

Staring intently out of one eye at the young man who was chattering on like a machine gun, Touko-san finally opens her mouth.

"If you came to waste our time then please leave. You entered someone else's Workshop without permission, so it's not like you can complain if you get killed."

"What? You came into my world without permission too. I didn't greet you since you had someone with you, but you should be the one being scolded for being so rude."

"Oh? That apartment complex is your Workshop? If that useless Bounded Field is your work I'll have to revise my opinion of you."

Heh, heh, she gave him a malicious smile.

The young man frowned slightly.

"Our Workshops are alien worlds just by existing within this era. The flock ignores those external abnormalities but will go to obsessive lengths to eliminate any abnormalities within. To avoid that Magi create Bounded Fields to hide themselves from the flock. By doing that the Magus makes their residence even more alien. However by making the Bounded Field stronger a Magus further isolates their alien world increasing the likelihood that the Association will detect it. In the end it is impossible to create a Bounded Field in human society that can avoid being detected by everyone.

"The ultimate Bounded Field is one that can't be detected by civilization or the Association. That apartment complex is exactly that. It's what you might call a seamless integration, it allows magical experiments to take place without leaking their abnormalities into the outside world thanks to its social mechanisms. It's a conclusion that Magi who couldn't become Magi would never reach. As far as I know there's only one person who could achieve something like that. But I see now, you finally caught up to him Cornelius Alba."

"Don't value me so cheaply Aozaki. Someone like Araya isn't even within my consideration. My only skill is putting a brain into a puppet body, allowing the brain to continue living. That alien world wouldn't exist without my power."

The youthfulness that was in his voice until now had disappeared, and the young man's voice got rough like some arrogant old man's.

"Dear me. Fine, what did you come here for Alba? Surely it wasn't in order to brag? I might have understood back when we were students, but at this stage we are both people who have stepped out of the Association. If it's to show off your experiment results just show it off to those many disciples that you have."

"Hmph. You're the same as always, I understand. Let's chat about it later. Eventually we'll have our discussion in my world. As expected, I can't relax in your headquarters. Pleasant conversations are best had in a relaxing pace. Aozaki, I've taken the the Taiji."

Touko-san's eyes widened slightly at the young man's composed words.

"You put the Taiji in a Taiji? I can acknowledge your sincere desire to get closer to the Origin, but the Counter Force will take action. I don't know whether it will be the world or mankind that will act. But in the past there hasn't been even one Magus who has been able to overcome it. Are you planning to destroy yourself, Alba?"

Touko-san looked sharply at the young man in the red coat.

However he just grinned as if he'd had his way.

"The Counter Force? Aahh, that hindrance won't come up this time. We're not opening a new path, but merely tracing a path that is already open. There can't be any backlash. Nevertheless, we plan to proceed with caution. We'll treat the Ryougi sample with the utmost care."

–Ryou, gi?

"What did you do with Shiki!?"

Before I knew it, I was suddenly shouting.

They both turned toward me at once. Touko-san who was scowling as if to say "You idiot," and the young man was staring at me in shock.

I scolded myself for my actions, but it was too late now.

The young man in the red coat saw me, he was grinning as if he was having a lot of fun.

"You must be the boy from yesterday. I see, I had heard you weren't taking on any disciples, but it seems you do have one. I'm so happy, now I have one more thing to look forward to, Aozaki." He said while turning back to look at Touko-san.

He talked with his arms spread out like some opera singer, I couldn't think of him as someone in their right mind.

"He's not a disciple or anything... Although it would be pointless to explain."

Touko-san sighed while rubbing her temples with her fingers, as if to suppress a headache.

"Is that all you came here for? I appreciate you taking the trouble to deliver the message, but didn't you think that I might inform the Association?"

"Hmph, you wouldn't do something like that. Even if you did by some off chance it would take them at least six days to get here. Some negotiations would need to take place with the organization here for a group from the Association to step foot in Japan, that would take another two days. Look, even some deity somewhere could create a whole new world with all that time!"

"Ahahahaha," the young man bent down and laughed.

After laughing to his heart's content he seemed satisfied. His cheerful demeanor returned and he smoothly turned on his heel.

"Well, that's all for now. You will need to prepare as well, but I'll be hoping to see you again as soon as possible."

Speaking in a bright tone to the end, the young man left with his red coat flaring out behind him like a cape.

"Touko-san, what did he just say?"

"Aahh, he's saying that Shiki has been kidnapped and locked up."

Once the young man in the red coat had left, I had hurried over to the Chief's desk and Touko-san had given me that smooth answer. Even though I was perplexed by that overly calm attitude, I asked a question that I knew the answer to.

"Locked up? Where?"

"The Ogawa Apartment Complex. Probably on the top floor, since there wasn't an accessible roof. In that case it would be the tenth floor of one of the towers. Shiki has a Yin nature, so it must be the east tower."

No matter how you looked at her Touko-san was calm. She was even composed enough to light up a cigarette and take a puff while she stared up at the ceiling. I wasn't optimistic enough to go along with her. The fact that Shiki had been captured was something I couldn't quite believe, but even if that was a lie I had to run out to confirm it.

And so, at the moment I was about to run out, Touko-san told me to wait.

"What is it? Your policy is to always be hands off, isn't it Chief?"

When I said as much in an annoyed-tone, Touko-san nodded with a stiff expression upon her face.

"You are generally correct. But this time it isn't someone else's business. For some reason I think it has something to do with me as well. Although I predicted things would go like this from the moment I decided to get involved with Shiki."

"Really, what an inevitability," Touko-san repeated a line she had let out once before.

"On top of that Kokutou. Going to a Magus's home ground means that you are going to battle. Whether it's this Workshop of mine, or Alba's apartment complex. To a Magus a castle isn't something which is meant for defense. Rather it's for attacking, it's something with which to wipe out any invaders. I don't know about myself, but if you went Kokutou you may get turned into duck roast at the front door."

When I heard that, I finally realized that the young man in the red coat was the same kind of person as Touko-san... Although, I had been thinking that something hadn't been normal about that eccentric demeanor of his.

"But nothing happened yesterday?"

"That's because you looked like a civilian. I told you before. A Magus doesn't use Magecraft except against another Magus. If they rashly take action and cause trouble all their efforts until then become pointless. The fact that apartment complex is weird isn't something Alba wants wildly known."

She said that, but a Magus should be able to take care of someone like me easily. Hypnosis could make someone's memory hazy. If you had something which was called Magecraft, I think it would be able to do more than that.

When I expressed such a question, Touko-san nodded and then gave me a paradoxical answer.

"Let's see now, if it's just someone's memories you can do almost anything. Within Runes there's even a specific carving called oblivion just for that. But the time when that worked is long past. In the old days it didn't matter if there was one or two people who lost their memories. They were considered to have been fooled by fairies or something and the matter was passed over. But it's different now right? If there's something wrong with a person's memory, it's thoroughly investigated. What they investigate isn't the person who has had their memory erased, but rather the people around them. Their friends, family, or superiors won't suspect it, but you can't erase memories that far ahead.

"It's the same as a Bounded Field. If you manipulate someone's memories in order to conceal an abnormality. Then the abnormality of the memory being manipulated gets revealed. The possibility that could be traced back to the apartment complex isn't zero. Then there's also the fact that you can't rule out the possibility of the person whose memory had been erased regaining their memory."

Touko-san spoke while bitterly puffing on a cigarette.

... I see, now that it was spelled out for me I understood. I might have been a bit overly worried, but in the modern world even the smallest mysteries weren't ignored and were tracked down. No, now that everything had an explanation, things that didn't have an explanation were being made to stand out.

If that was the case, why not just erase people themselves, rather than their memory? One could either destroy their intelligence and turn them into an invalid, or erase their life and destroy them. The dead couldn't talk, so there wouldn't be any way for the secret to get out... Ah. That's right. Either way the result would be the same.

The people around would definitely notice that hole. In the present day where information technologies were reaching their limit, following the footsteps of one person who had disappeared wasn't so hard. As a result you would end up at that apartment complex.

That was why normal people who visited that mansion didn't notice anything strange. The strange structure of that building was set up to get rid of such external factors, while giving the appearance that nothing was going on.

Even if that Alba guy was a Magus, and even if he was planning something bad (or at least, that was the only way to interpret what he had just said), he could only watch silently. Although he knew both, the incredible coincidence where the thief had broken in to rob an empty home and the woman who had fled there after being attacked, would bring the police, he hadn't touched them. Because by manipulating their memories, or killing them, he would actually be bringing more attention to those events.

That's right, in order to remain a normal apartment complex, he could only accept the events those unlucky people had caused.

I remembered the paradox Azaka brought up the other day in this office.

The phenomenon caused in order to erase a phenomenon, in the end it would become an action to drive yourself into a corner. But nevertheless if you left the first phenomenon as it was, the fact that you were driven into a corner didn't change. No matter how you struggled the thing called a "phenomenon" wouldn't disappear.

The question itself drives the question into a corner.

A phenomenon that had already occurred could only be hidden by slapping another meaning upon it, since the phenomenon itself could never be returned to nothingness.

"It was like that. There were no flaws in that Bounded Field. If not for those two incidents, if Shiki had disappeared all of the sudden, we couldn't have picked that place out for special attention. The lesson to be learned from this Kokutou, is that a meddler will get involved in everything, so there can't be anything that is perfect." Touko-san said something which got to the heart of the matter.

... Even if something was perfect in itself, the unpredictable meddler had come from the outside. If you were to name the meddler that had visited that apartment complex, you would be talking about the two events that had overlapped by chance.

"Um, is that Counter Force that person talked about before referring to that?"

As expected, when I had recalled that conversation and asked such a thing, Touko-san nodded with a bitter expression on her face.

"That may be true. You see, the term Counter Force refers to the 'Restorer of Direction' which is at once our greatest ally, and our greatest enemy. We humans do not want to die. We want to live in peace. This planet that we live on doesn't want to die either, it wants to live for as long as possible.

"It's the unified unconscious of the collective human species, the desire to see that the world continues to exist. The fundamental instinct of the human race, converging and taking form. That is the Counter Guardian that we call the Counter Force.

"Let's say, for example, there's an extraordinary person, A, who has conquered the world. This person is a just person and his rule has been exemplary, at least within the limits of human morals. However, if A's actions are viewed as evil when viewed not from an individual perspective but from the whole of the human species, in other words a potential cause for extinction, then the Counter Force will manifest.

"This force is an unconscious collective of humanity itself, including A, that wishes to preserve its own existence. To protect humanity, this entity manifests itself, without anyone knowing, and it erases A without anyone being able to observe it. The representative created by the swirling subconscious of humanity is part of the unconscious, and therefore acts without its own conscious will.

"That doesn't mean this formless consciousness becomes a curse and kills A. The Counter Force usually inhabits a human, who then kills A. The person who has become the medium has enough power to topple A, but no more, in order that they cannot replace A. Receivers who have the right channels and can accept the whole will of humans are few and far between. History calls them heroes and praises them.

"But in modern times that title isn't used. Civilization has progressed to the point where it has become quite simple for humanity to destroy itself. If some company's chairman invested all his money into expanding the amount of logging in the Amazon rainforest, the world could end in a year. See? The Earth is in danger wherever and whenever. There are countless individuals out there who, incited by the Counter Force, save the world without anyone knowing. There is one hero per age, a thing such as saving the world is no longer enough to get you called a hero.

"Also, in the case that A is too powerful to topple with a human's power, the Counter Force becomes a natural force and destroys the area including A. Long ago, the sinking of a continent was due to this too.

"... If you talk about it like this it seems like some guardian of humanity, but this thing has no human emotions. There are times when it blocks acts that would make everyone happier. The tricky thing is that in the end this nuisance is the representation of humanity itself.

"Although we can't comprehend it the Counter Force is the ultimate form of the dominant race. Time and time again in the past, this thing appeared in front of Magi who attempted certain experiments, and the Magi were all massacred."

... Touko-san's story was really long.

But I remembered hearing something similar during a class in high school. I wondered what subject it was in and what it was about, it was something along the lines that all humans were different, but still connected in some way.

... Separate from that, the story just now made me think of the Saint of Orléans. The old story of how a common farmer's daughter had received a revelation from God to fight. They say that in reality all that happened was that she used tactics that the knights of the time would have scorned and refused to use, dismissing them as too cowardly or degrading, but wasn't that also the result of her being driven forward by something? Someone who suddenly became a different person and acted accordingly. Someone who only became a different for that moment to fight with some evildoer. That's what the Counter Force was, the guardian of humans

"... Thanks for telling me all this. So does that experiment you mentioned have something to do with Shiki?"

After spending so much time with Touko-san, I could read the flow of this person's conversations. This person doesn't say anything meaningless. Even something she said in a joking fashion had something relevant within it that was revealed later. So, I realized that that experiment must have been the reason Shiki had been caught.

Touko-san had put out the cigarette flame then, apparently amused, looked this way.

"I don't know what Alba plans to do with Shiki. That guy's ultimate objective is to reach the Swirl of the Root. In that case he would open up Shiki's body, but thankfully that guy doesn't have the guts for something like that. He will probably think it over until the last moment. He was always like that. There was a time he was happy about capturing a Redcap alive, but he didn't know how to dissect it properly so it eventually rotted. Well, even he

said as much himself, but Shiki's body will probably be fine for another seven days. Of course, this is in the case that she was captured alive."

Touko-san said something very disturbing.

"Shiki's fine. That guy, essentially said he was keeping her. His words implied that she's alive."

Without realizing it, I was glaring at Touko-san while I tried to rebut her. Because, when my mouth was speaking, I had imagined Shiki getting murdered.

"And so, we have to save her quickly." I muttered.

But how? At a time like this, I didn't have any options. The only thing I could do was call the Police and have them investigate that apartment complex.

But something like that wouldn't have any effect.

The enemy was someone who had made such a diabolic contraption. If the police arrived in large numbers, it was certain that Shiki would disappear without a trace.

To save Shiki there were only two options; either get rid of the man in the red coat, or secretly retrieve Shiki. If there was anything I could do it was the latter.

... Yeah, we could look over the blueprints of that apartment complex again. Somewhere, there might be a way in that even the ones who built the place didn't know about.

I was lost in my own thoughts, but Touko-san called out to me in an exasperated tone.

"Wait, wait. If it's anything to do with Shiki you lose control. I told you at the hospital too didn't I? It's too dangerous so you need to stay put Kokutou. You won't be needed this time, since a Magus's opponent should be a Magus."

And with that, she stood up.

She threw a long coat over the business clothes she wore everyday. The brown leather coat was heavy and it didn't look like a knife could even cut through it.

"Alba said all those things, but there's no reason to spend two or three days preparing to challenge his castle. If he wants, I'll go right now. Kokutou, in the closet in my room there's a bag, can you bring it here for me? The orange one."

There was no emotion in Touko-san's words.

Obeying her Magus-like words I moved to the room next door and opened the closet... Inside there were bags instead of clothes, an orange bag that looked like a bulked up briefcase and a large bag that looked like it could be used for traveling. As ordered I lifted the orange bag. It was unexpectedly heavy. The bag had an elegant design, and on the outside there were various sticker-like things stuck on.

When I returned to the office and handed the bag over, Touko-san took out a packet of cigarettes from her chest pocket and handed them to me.

"Keep those for me. They are some awful cigarettes from Taiwan but that's all I got right now. Of course there isn't any company that made them, and some eccentric craftsman made just a cardboard box's worth of them. That said, out of all my possessions that is probably the second most valuable thing I have."

Leaving behind those strange words, she turned around and started walking out.

... I wondered if perhaps her most valuable possession was herself, so I asked her. But she only turned back her head and sulked.

“That’s rather rude. I know it’s me, but even I don’t treat people like possessions.”

Just like when she wasn’t wearing glasses, she pouted her lips.

And then Touko-san continued talking, returning to her usual cool expression.

“Kokutou. Magi are kind to their disciples and family. Since they are something like their other selves, Magi will often fight desperately to protect them as well... Well, that’s why you can wait here in peace. I’ll bring Shiki back tonight.”

Click, clack, could be heard as she was walking away.

Unable to say anything as I watched her back, I let the brown-coated Magician go.

Paradox Spiral (paradox paradigm) .Upper/ Fin

English Release Credits

Overlooking View
Murder Speculation
Remaining Sense of Pain

Translation:

TakaJun (MirrorMoon)

ssssz

Editing:

Velocity7

Georgi

The Hollow Shrine
Paradox Spiral .Upper

Translation:

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